The year 2014 is one which marks many historic anniversaries. Some are somber and hold global importance — the 100th Anniversary of the start of the First World War, the 70th anniversary of the D-Day Invasion of Normandy, and, more recently, the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Throughout the year there have been other anniversaries of a more entertaining nature — 50 years since The Beatles first arrived in New York, 25 years since the debut of Apple’s Macintosh computer, and it’s been TEN YEARS since the Red Sox won the World Series and broke the Curse of the Bambino.

For those of us in the business of local history, we take particular note of the major Taunton milestones of 2014. This year marks 150 years since being named a city in 1864 and it has been 375 years since Taunton was first incorporated as a town in 1639. These events were celebrated this past October with a 375th Anniversary Parade as part of our annual Arts and History Festival during Liberty and Union Weekend.

With this newsletter, we offer insights into Taunton’s earliest days and articles on some of the people, places, and events that make this city one to celebrate each and every year.

We hope you enjoy and always welcome your feedback. To stay connected with the latest events and activities we have planned you can:

- Call us at 508.822.1622
- Visit us at 66 Church Green, Taunton, MA
- Connect online at www.oldcolonyhistoricalsociety.org
- "Like" us on Facebook
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First Families: The Founding of Richmondtown

by Jim Richmond

Straddling the border between Taunton and Middleboro, a family settled in the late 17th Century, and over the generations grew into an extended family enclave. The family was the Richmonds. Their enclave became known as Richmondtown. This article explores the Taunton origins of Richmondtown, born in a property dispute all too common during the early years of settlement.

In 1698 John Richmond, surveyor, town councilman, purchaser of Indian land, respected citizen of Taunton, was angry. In the conclusion of a long letter to the authorities he could not resist taking a shot at “Bridgewater men.”

I shall hint but nothing more to your honors but end by noting in a book set out by Mr. Cotton Mather concerning the life of Mr. John Elliot, page 150, that the people of New England...do not own so much as one foot of land in the country without a fair purchase and consent from the natives that laid claim unto it, from whence I conclude good Mr. Mather knew not of Bridgewater’s men’s acting about Stoney Ware lands, or else he would have exempted Bridgewater men in said book.1

Stoney Ware was the location of the Calves Pasture granted to Henry Andrews in 1646 and located in the northeast region of Taunton. This letter was the final shot in a long running battle concerning ownership of land east of the Taunton River in the area along the border between Bridgewater, Taunton and Middleboro. John’s point in citing Cotton Mather’s letter was that—unlike Taunton—the Bridgewater men in this dispute never purchased the land from the Indian’s, negating their claim to this tract. In contrast, John had noted that Taunton has purchased this land several times, beginning with Elizabeth Poole in the first days of the settlement.2 But any English claim of ownership needs to be examined a little closer.

In 1698 the dispute was between the Proprietors of Taunton and “four men of Bridgewater” but the local Indian tribes also had an interest in this land. The area known as Titicutt wedged in between Bridgewater, Taunton and Middleboro had always been known as Indian land. In 1664 Josias Chickatabut son of the sachem of the same name, transferred this land to Oweas (English Name Thomas Hunter) and Popennohoe (Peter) expressly forbidding them from “selling or any manner of making over or conveying the said land or any part or parcel thereof unto the English forever.”3 With this assignment, the Titicutt Reservation came into being as protected Indian land, often alluded to in subsequent Plymouth Court orders. Of course this did not prevent Peter from selling off part of this property to Constant Southworth and John Thompson on behalf of Middleboro proprietors in 1675, on the eve of King Phillip’s War.4 Hunter later disputed this sale, and the Plymouth court returned the land to him in 1678, which he later conveyed to his sons in his will.5 So it is not at all clear that this was ever rightfully sold to or owned by the English. In a sense then, the dispute among the colonists between Taunton and Bridgewater, begs the question if either group had a right to this land.

The Plymouth Court may have understood the weak basis for this dispute among the English, since they were very hesitant to intrude on the Indian land at Titticut. As early as 1660, in one of the Court orders held up by the Bridgewater men in their claim to the land at Stoney Ware, the court made this point:

A parcel of land, lying betwixt Tetricutt and Taunton, is to be reviewed by Constant Southworth and William Paybody, and if it shall not bee found within the bounds of Taunton, nor too near Tetticutt, that then William Brett, John Willis, Thomas Hayward, Sr, and Arthur Harris have a competency granted and confirmed unto them, if it bee there to bee found; if not they have liberty to look out for further supply with what conveniency they can.6

In this court order, the seeds of the dispute were sown. Similar to many such orders, the Court hedged its bets, being careful to place qualifiers on its land grants. In fact, John Richmond argued that this was not even a grant, but simply an action to locate land that may be granted later. His point is supported by the Court itself which five years later actually granted this land to these four men and two others—Richard Williams and John Carey—60 acres each, with the same constraints as before.7 In 1668 this land was laid out by William Bradford and Constant Southworth, each lot described in detail, running from South Brook near the lands of Henry Andrews, northeastward across Trout Brook to the Teticutt path.8

These “Bridgewater men” were not just a random group of colonists thrown together to secure land. All were originally settlers of Duxbury where they were counted among those fit for duty in 1643, and all become proprietors of Bridgewater when that plantation was first established in 1645.9 Hayward, Willis and Brett are mentioned in the Plymouth Colony records are early as 1640, when they were granted land along the

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1Mass Archives Collection: Vol. 113, p. 168
2Ibid. Vol. 113, p. 177
3Indian Deeds, Jeremy Bangs, NEHGS, 2002, Deed #146, p. 328
4Ibid., Deed #321, p. 479
5Ibid, Vol. 113, p. 177
6Ibid, Deed #381, p. 545
8Plymouth County Records, Vol. IV, p. 96
9PCR v 4, p. 190
10History of Bridgewater, Nahum Mitchell, Boston, 1840, p. 10-11
Namasscuset River in the area later to be included in the town of Middleboro. These three served as the earliest representatives to the general court at Plymouth and both Willis and Brett served as deacons under the leadership of long time minister James Keith. As is often the case, these interrelationships were solidified through family ties. Sons of Thomas Hayward, Nathaniel and Thomas, married daughters of both Willis and Brett, just as daughter Susannah had married John Richmond. John, himself a well regarded leader in Taunton, was not afraid to mix it up with his counterparts across the Great River, even if they were relatives.

Why was John Richmond so upset by this dispute? For him it was both professional and personal. John knew the nooks and crannies of Taunton better than anyone. The son of one of the original Forty-Six Purchasers of Taunton, he had served as the town surveyor in setting out numerous boundaries within the town and with neighboring communities. Also, he led the efforts to document the land claims and rights of the original proprietors and their descendents. In 1669 he was commissioned, along with six others, to unravel these ownership rights, thereby resolving the ongoing disputes over land ownership among the residents of Taunton. In addition, he was often asked to equitably divide inheritances among survivors when wills were either unclear or non-existent. His civic responsibilities and expertise alone could account for his interest-his defense of Taunton lands comes toward the end of a lifetime of service to his community.

But for John it was much more than that. It had become personal four years before when Joseph Hayward went to court to claim land given to him by his grandfather, Thomas Hayward, in his 1678 will. Complicating this matter was another personal connection. Thomas Hayward was the father-in-law of John through his first wife Susannah, making Joseph John’s nephew by marriage! The will was clear enough: “I give unto my grandson Joseph Hayward sixty acres of land lying upon Tetticutt River below the ware, given to me by the court, lying between the lands of William Brett and Arthur Harris.” This is certainly the 60 acres supposedly granted by the court back in 1665.

But there was a problem. The land was already occupied. In 1692, Edward, John’s first born son of his second wife Abigail Rogers, married, and John gave him:

_for good will and affection...that parcel of land, both upland and meadow in Taunton containing sixty acres with a parcel of meadow containing 3 acres lying at a place called Stoney Ware, bounded on the west by Taunton Great River on the east by the common, on the north by Trout River, on the south by the land of Joshua Tisdale._

John clearly believed that this land belonged to Taunton, who had granted it to him in one of several land distributions to the proprietors and their descendents over the years. In 1683, years after the grant to the Bridgewater men, the town of Taunton had granted to John Richmond “twenty acres of land on both sides of the brook called Trout Brook on or near the north side of the town bounds.” But for Joseph Hayward it was personal also – he believed this land was rightfully given to him by his grandfather, and he pressed the issue. After filing the complaint he and a friend confronted Edward on his land and told him that he had built his house on land he had inherited. This particularly incensed father John, who four years later was still steaming about it, saying that Joseph has “forced into the house as if he [Edward] had been a criminal” and worse still, did it “just when his wife was delivered.”

In response to Hayward’s complaint, Edward was ordered to appear in Superior Court in March, 1694 which decided the case in favor of Hayward and fined Edward 20 shillings. However, for reasons not clear today, the same court reversed their ruling in July, admitting that the original judgment was “erroneous and contrary to law.” As part of the settlement, Joseph Hayward sold 30 acres of this land to John for 8 pounds. So at the end of the day, the Richmond’s acquired this land which would become one of the core properties of Richmondtown. No one seemed to worry that the English ownership of the land may have been illegitimate. One small piece of the puzzle was in place. Another piece was across the county line in Middleboro, and again there was a family connection.

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1Bangs #22, p. 244
2Mitchell, p. 35, 45
3Extract of Will of Thomas Hayward, Suffolk Court Files 3185, Mass Archives
4Suffolk Court Files, 2790, also quoted in RFR, p. 80
5Suffolk Court Files 3073, also quoted in RFR, p. 79
6Bristol County Land Records, 2:335
7Suffolk Court Files, 3185

**Firsts: From the Proprietors**

_by Jonathan Green_

On August 3, 1640, the Plymouth Colony Court granted Richard Paul a license to keep a victualing house in Cohannet. This was Taunton’s first ordinary. In England as well as the North American colonies, ordinaries served as a place of common entertainment for townspeople and travelers alike. Ordinaries provided victuals, liquor, and a venue for colonists to socialize, exchange news, and even conduct business. Because of their social and economic significance, local magistrates controlled the establishment and operation of ordinaries. Plymouth Colony Records from 1638 contain one of the earliest laws relating to ordinaries. This law orders, “That none shall dyett in Inns or Alehouses nor haunt them wch are in the Townes they live in nor make them the ordinary place of their aboade.”

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When George J. Donahue left his Brockton home on the afternoon of Sunday, April 30, 1905, little did he think that he was about to ride into Taunton history. On that day the thirty-year old automobile salesman had invited several friends to join him for an excursion along the banks of the Taunton River in one of the latest touring cars being offered for sale at his dealership. A good time was guaranteed for all.

In those days, before the construction of Route 24, the preferred course of travel would have been south on Route 138, through Easton, Raynham, Taunton and into Dighton and then Somerset. With automobiles still a rarity at that time, the only competition for the roadway would have come from horses, bicycles and pedestrians, and a large touring car would certainly take precedence and attract a good deal of attention. The latter, regrettably, would prove to be Donahue’s undoing.

That Sunday afternoon in the early spring brought ideal weather for outside activity, and so large crowds swarmed throughout downtown Taunton. As Donahue and friends made their way south from Brockton, local residents looking to pass a quiet Sunday gathered on street corners and inside ice cream parlors in eager anticipation of the coming summer. Although the pace of life would soon change forever, this was still a quieter, more genteel era.

In 1903, City Square – which is what Taunton Green was called in those days – was still placed firmly in the nineteenth century, and that included the haphazard, leisurely pace of travel. The city was still more than a decade away from instituting the now-familiar rotary traffic pattern around the Common, so drivers could steer their vehicles in any direction that pleased them (or their horses).

When the Donahue touring car reached the corner of Broadway and the Taunton Green, it sailed directly south, toward Weir Street. Perhaps the occupants noticed the Common as it whizzed by on the right hand side of the automobile, but if they did see it, it was a fleeting glance because they were moving very quickly.

Citations for speeding were not uncommon in those days, but they had always been issued for “over driving” horses. This was necessary because not only were speeding horses dangerous to pedestrians, they were also a danger to themselves. Cruelty to animals was not tolerated, and so drivers who pushed the horses too far were hauled into court and fined.

While the law covered horses, there was no precedent in Taunton for prosecuting speeding automobile drivers. That changed, however, when Officer George E. Caswell, on duty in Central Square, spied Donahue and his crew speeding toward the corner of Weir Street. In a flash the lawman was in the road waving over the surprised driver, and after a stern speech on the need for safety he issued a summons ordering Donahue to appear in district court three days later. There, after pleading guilty and apologizing, Donahue – like a common horse botherer – was fined $10 and sent on his way. Although he is lost to history from that point onward – he does go down as the first person in the city ever to be cited for driving an automobile too fast.
approached a nearby officer and asked where the men of the 89th would be headed. “I can’t tell you,” he replied, “but you’re going north.” That bit of information made him believe that he would soon be headed for Europe, and sure enough, once underway the long trains that carried the division made their way slowly into Virginia and toward the Atlantic coast.

Seventy years later, Sergeant Solomon recalled that on about the second day of the journey he began to recognize a few familiar landmarks and then, he said, he realized that they were headed for New England. “The only shipping base I knew was Camp Myles Standish in Taunton, Massachusetts… I was betting on Myles Standish, for I knew the area like the back of my hand,” he said. Indeed he should have, because his wife was living in Tiverton, Rhode Island, an easy ride from Taunton.

Almost 700 miles after leaving Camp Butner, the sergeant’s hopes were realized when the trains were switched onto the spur leading into Standish. The weather during that first week in January 1945 was cold and windy, and there were six inches of snow on the ground. Solmon immediately made plans to secure a pass and find a ride to Tiverton, which was only about eighteen miles from the camp.

It’s unlikely that the men of the 89th Division—even Bay Staters such as Sergeant Solmon—knew much about Camp Myles Standish when they arrived. Opened in October 1942, it was the main staging area for the Boston Port of Embarkation. One of ten embarkation facilities nationwide and one of six on the Atlantic seaboard, the BPOE would rank third by war’s end in the amount of men and materiel shipped to support the war against the Axis. Only the ports of New York and San Francisco would surpass it.

As the Boston port’s principal staging area, it was the responsibility of Standish to prepare GIs for immediate shipment to Europe. A sprawling camp of 1,620 acres, the facility had a station complement of 2,500 military personnel, including nurses, and approximately 750 civilian workers. Sergeant Solmon and the 89th Division would stay at the camp for seven days, slightly longer than the four or five-day average. Most likely the added time was needed in order to arrange for enough ships to transport an entire infantry division across the Atlantic in mid-winter.

As part of the staging process, the division’s men and equipment were given one last check before heading overseas. Soldiers were given dental and medical exams, including inoculations, and there was some last minute training as well. Among the latter was the abandon ship drill that was conducted on nearby Watson Pond, where instructors in life jackets crawled over the side of a mock transport ship that had supposedly been torpedoed in the North Atlantic. Many GIs, including Solmon, had vivid memories of that in later years.

While its soldiers were going through their final preparation, the division’s equipment—everything from side arms to jeeps to office supplies—was checked for effectiveness and if found wanting was repaired or replaced. Four large maintenance shops worked around the clock to ensure that all was in readiness when the...
A Seven-Day Stay at Camp Myles Standish
[ continued from page 5 ]

orders came down through the chain of command to move out.

Soldiers being soldiers, a robust social life was the order of the day (and night) when off-base passes were issued. Many GIs caught busses or trains to Boston while the less fortunate settled for the nightlife of Providence or even Taunton. Not among them, however, was Sergeant Solmon, who in seven days managed to secure two overnight passes back to his young wife in Tiverton, Rhode Island. There, for a few hours, the loneliness and anxiety of separation could be forgotten.

What could not be forgotten, however, was the ironclad regulation that required pass holders to be back at Standish in time for roll call at 7 A.M. This proved problematic at the end of Solmon’s second visit to Tiverton, for when he arose before dawn he was greeted by what he remembers as a “roaring snowstorm.” The blowing, drifting snow forced the cancelation of all public transportation and there were few vehicles of any type on the roads. After bidding a final good-bye to his wife, Sergeant Solmon set out at 5 A.M. intending to hitchhike back to Standish in time for roll call. A friendly driver picked him up almost immediately and gave him a ride into downtown Fall River, which was practically deserted because of the bad weather.

Keeping a close eye on his watch, Solmon entered a diner to see if there was some way to continue his journey. Finally realizing that he could never make it back to Standish on time, the young soldier ordered coffee and began telling the diner’s owner about the punishment for being counted A.W.O.L. Just then, a man entered and proclaimed that this was no day to be driving a taxicab. The diner man suggested that Solmon approach the newcomer and explain his problem. The cab driver, upon finishing his breakfast, told the young soldier that he’d help him get back to the post and then, after picking up two more desperate GIs, they made the slow, dangerous trip back to Taunton. Seventy years later Solmon remembered that the cab driver refused to accept payment for the ride so the soldiers gratefully threw tip money into the car’s open window before running off. Meanwhile, inside the camp, Solmon’s captain had the good sense to extend the curfew for several hours so that returning soldiers would receive no punishment for their late arrival.

The 89th Infantry Division left Camp Myles Standish on January 10, 1945. For reasons of security, the curtains on the railway cars were drawn throughout the thirty-five-mile trip to Boston. Sergeant Solmon remembered that upon arriving at the BPOE, the train pulled into a long warehouse that was adjacent to a docking pier. “We left the train and lined up by companies and stood there waiting,” he recalled. Outside, he could see a large, dark gray ship tied up to the dock. “A line formed at the gang plank,” he remembered, “and all too soon our company joined the line. Then it was my turn to give the officers [my] name, rank, serial number and company, and [then] start that long walk up the gang plank.” As he boarded the ship, Solmon, never one to pass up a laugh, asked the captain if he was holding a round trip ticket. If the officer found that funny, he disguised it well and barked at the sergeant to move along quickly.

Solmon’s troop ship, one of several carrying 89th Division personnel, left Boston at 11 P.M., and the men were allowed to go on deck to see the departure. Standing at the rail in the darkness with a light snow falling, Solmon realized that he was shaking. “I don’t know if it was the cold or the event taking place that caused me to shake,” he remembered, “possibly a little of both.” With the war in Europe raging, it was a sobering episode for all those present as the ship made its way out of the harbor and out toward the convoy waiting off the coast. The sergeant remembered that “With the snow falling, it didn’t take too long before the shore disappeared and they announced all personnel please leave the top deck. As I went below I wondered if I would see these shores again.” And with that, the 89th Division passed beyond the jurisdiction of the Boston Port of Embarkation.

Sergeant Solmon and the men of his division landed at the port of Le Havre, France on January 21, 1945, and after a period of training were sent east to enter combat near Echternach, Luxembourg on March eleventh. From there they moved quickly, crossing the Moselle River on the seventeenth of that month. They crossed the Rhine River under withering enemy fire on March 26 and shortly thereafter took the city of Eisenach, Germany. Two weeks later the division liberated Ohrdruf, a sub-camp of Buchenwald, and the first Nazi concentration camp freed by American forces. They finished the war in the vicinity of the Zwickau, Germany, near the Czech border and returned to the U.S. when the war ended.

Mr. Solmon, who was 97-years-old when he visited the Society in June 2014, remains an avid student of World War II. Both his memory and his wit are as sharp as ever, and he delights in recounting his wartime service. The old soldier was generous not only with his time but also with the written record of his experiences that he has compiled in the years since the war.

Members, staff and friends of the Society are saddened by the passing of Charles E. Crowley, who died on Thursday, November 20, 2014. Charlie joined the OCHS in 1976 and was elected to the Board of Directors in 1986. In recent years, he was a member of the Executive Committee and served as Secretary of the Society. A lifelong student of Taunton history, Charlie took special interest in the city’s photographic history. Among the several books he authored or co-authored was a picture postcard history of Taunton that was published by the Society in 1992. Over the years Charlie generously shared both his photographs and his love of history with Society members, and his loss is keenly felt.

We Remember Our Friend, Our Colleague …
The recent death of film star Lauren Bacall brings to mind an incident that she had surely forgotten but was long remembered by some area residents. On October 26, 1952 the country was in the final days of a presidential campaign pitting former general Dwight D. Eisenhower, a Republican, against the Democratic governor of Illinois, Adlai Stevenson. Eisenhower, on his way to winning thirty-nine of the forty-eight states, had a commanding lead over his opponent. Nevertheless, Stevenson continued with his campaign, which included a whistle stop tour of New England in the final days of the contest.

One of the last stops on the campaign trail found Stevenson and his entourage in Taunton and, because it was a Sunday, the candidate had announced that he did not wish to make a political speech. While he certainly wanted to meet local party leaders and be seen by the voters, the Democratic nominee hoped to forgo the usual campaign rhetoric on that day. Coincidentally, Stevenson’s visit was scheduled for the very afternoon that the new Myles Standish State School—one day to be renamed in honor of Massachusetts governor Paul A. Dever—was to be dedicated. Stevenson was invited to be present for the purpose of delivering a few general remarks.

Just six days earlier one of the largest crowds in Taunton history had mobbed the Green hoping to get a glimpse of Eisenhower as he made a brief speech on the Common. Conversely, Stevenson’s appearance in North Taunton the following Sunday attracted only about 5,000 people. Nevertheless, Taunton was a traditional Democratic Party stronghold, and it’s likely that the number would have been much higher had the locals only known who would be accompanying the candidate.

Stevenson and the local politicians mounting the speaking platform that Sunday afternoon didn’t have a chance once the crowd caught sight of Hollywood superstars Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall and Robert Ryan sitting onstage and in the front row. Moreover, despite the fact that Ryan had been a long time screen favorite, it was Bogie and Bacall who riveted the crowd’s attention. At age 52, Bogart was still enjoying the success of The African Queen, for which he had won an Academy Award the year before. Bacall, twenty-five years Bogart’s junior and his fourth wife, had given birth to the second of the couple’s two children only three months earlier. At age 27, and with a string of hit movies behind her, Bacall represented the essence of self-assured glamour to her legions of fans.

A bit of Hollywood gossip had trickled into the campaign because Bogart had come to the Stevenson camp rather late, and in fact the actor had worked hard to secure the Republican nomination for Eisenhower. It was widely conjectured that Bacall, a fierce liberal who had been warned by an influential movie producer to stay out of politics, had convinced her husband to switch his political allegiance to Stevenson. That—and only that—had caused the Hollywood tough guy to abandon Ike, or so it was believed within the entertainment community.

A number of local politicians in addition to Stevenson made brief speeches that afternoon, and as soon as the festivities adjourned thousands in the crowd tried to get a closer look at Bogart and Bacall. One of the more successful was a reporter for the Taunton Daily Gazette, who was granted a brief interview with the stars as they signed autographs for those lucky enough to get within arm’s reach. Bogart denied that he had come to Stevenson’s camp reluctantly, and when she was asked about a possible role in her husband’s switch, Bacall gave the legendary tough guy his due. “Nobody sways Bogie,” she said, “He makes up his own mind.” “We wanted Ike to get the nomination,” she explained, “but we have since discovered that he doesn’t stand for the things that we were led to believe that he did stand for.” She didn’t elaborate on what those “things” were.

Bacall had certainly spent more time and traveled more miles on the campaign trail, and when she was asked about her dive into politics, she said, “I love it so much, and am intrigued so much by it, that I might run for public office myself someday.” After that, and perhaps with the newspaper’s female subscribers in mind, the reporter found it necessary to describe what she was wearing (black dress and shoes), including her jewelry (gold, of course). The actress was, he promised his readers, the very picture of “poise and quiet self-assurance.”

Bacall never ran for public office, but she remained at the top of her profession for the rest of her life. Her marriage to Bogart lasted just a little over five years, until he died of throat cancer in January 1957. Stevenson lost to Eisenhower in a landslide, but not in Taunton, where the Democrat carried the city by a few hundred votes. And those scraps of paper upon which the actors scrawled their autographs on that afternoon more than sixty years ago. How many survive? and what wonderful artifacts from a great actress and a bygone campaign.

Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson and his famous Hollywood supporters were in Taunton for the dedication of the Myles Standish State School only a few days after Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower (pictured at left) spoke on Taunton Green in October 1952.
Since joining the Old Colony Historical Society as a Collections Management intern in May my focus has been on working to recatalogue, record, and rehouse the wonderful collection of historic clothing and textiles owned by the museum. When items are acquired into a museum collection it is critical to record as much information as possible about the object, and its past life, for future research and study. This is known as the object’s provenance, and in a museum as old as the OCHS, the history of recording provenance is often sporadic. Working as a Collections Management intern, it has been my role to serve as a detective of sorts and fill in missing pieces of information about the objects that I can discover.

While researching some of the fashion items in the collection the name “N.H. Skinner” or “Skinner’s” was often listed in the object provenance. Based on the labels in some of the garments I gathered that “N.H. Skinner & Co.” was a department store, but I wanted to know more. Who was Skinner? What is the history of his store? Answering these questions adds so much to the stories of many of the garments in the museum and begins to lay the foundation for new research and exhibits to share with the public.

In the 21st century the big box corporate-owned department stores are often the go-to places for luxury purchases as well as everyday items. Giant department stores can be built and opened in a matter of months. Local department stores like Skinner’s have difficulty competing with these retailers and therefore few remain. As a non-Taunton native my investigation of Skinner’s has been an eye opening experience. While even corporate-owned department stores can rise and fall within a decade, Skinner’s held strong in Taunton for nearly 100 years. My exploration not only helped me identify an object but gave me a deeper understanding of the impact and social significance of Skinner’s within the community. My hope is not only to preserve the physical objects but also the history of a cultural icon that living residents remember as a symbol of Taunton.

NATHAN HACK SKINNER

Housed in the archive collection of the OCHS is a small, nondescript letter. Dated July 6, 1866, the letter is addressed to a Mr. Joseph Crawford of Willimantic, CT. With only the response to read, it appears that the author is replying to Mr. Crawford, who had written about employment in a Taunton department store. The letter is signed by Nathan Skinner. In the letter Skinner informs Mr. Crawford that he received a letter of interest from him about a position with his company. Skinner informs Crawford he does have a position available in the store but not knowing Crawford at all he does not want to offer him the position outright. He also stresses concern because Crawford’s experience was limited to a small country dry goods store. Skinner writes, “We have regular departments and a regular system so you would probably have something to learn.” Despite his hesitations in the first page of the letter by the last paragraph Skinner informs Crawford as long as his references are solid he is willing to give him a chance. Vowing “to do the best I can by you or give you all I think you are worth.”

The fourth of nine children Nathan Hack Skinner was born in Troy, New York on November 1, 1828. While his parents were both natives of Massachusetts, Nathan was born during the family’s short time in residence in Troy. Skinner was educated in the public school system, and after working in a dry goods store for three years in Fall River he moved to Taunton in 1849 when he was 21 years old.

At the age of 26 Skinner married his first wife Lucy P. Brownell (d. Feb. 27, 1882) in 1854. The couple raised three children. Cora B. was born April 1855 but died in infancy in July 1855. A son, Nathan L., was born in 1866 but died while still a toddler 1868. Nathan and Lucy raised a third
child Addie W., who was born around 1856. It is uncertain if Addie was the couple’s biological or adopted daughter as no birth records have been found. Two years after Lucy’s death, on October 22, 1884, Skinner married Martha T. Rumsey of Chicago. His daughter Addie lived till adulthood but information on her whereabouts after her father’s death are unclear. Despite the fact that Addie was still alive at the time of her father’s death she is not mentioned in his obituary which simply states: “Mr. Skinner leaves a widow and several brothers and sisters and many relatives in this city and country” (Taunton Daily Gazette May 14, 1897). Another source mentions after Skinner’s death, “Martha T. Rumsey, who with an adopted daughter is still living” (Old Colony Historical Society 1899). The oldest public record found which lists Addie is the 1880 census, at which time when she was 23 years old.

In Taunton, Skinner began his career working as a clerk for Jabez Rounds, owner of J.S. Rounds store in 1844. As he began his business career in Taunton, Nathan Skinner also embedded himself in the fabric of the Taunton community. While there is little record of his participation in the political arena he was labeled a “Progressive.” He was friendly with African Americans in the community and was sympathetic to abolitionist causes during the Civil War. There is also a record of his financial contributions to ensure the welfare of the soldiers in the field during this time. A generous man, an article in the Taunton Daily Gazette from 1897 explains “his heart warmed toward all causes good and his hand open,” serving as evidence that he gave back to the community that provided for him. Skinner served on the Board of Trustees for Bristol Academy as well as an officer for the First Congregational Church of Taunton. According to his obituary, Skinner was a member and served as director of The American Unitarian Association, served as a Bank Director for the Taunton National Bank in 1882, and was elected a life member of the Old Colony Historical Society in 1878.

At some date that has since been lost to history, store owner Jabez Rounds made Skinner a partner in his business. After Rounds’ death, Skinner went on to purchase the entirety of the enterprise in either 1863 or 1864. Now the sole owner of the department store, the name was changed to N.H. Skinner & Company. Located on the corner of Main and Cedar Streets in downtown Taunton, MA, N.H Skinner & Company was described as a “department and dry goods concern” and included several different departments including Suits, Cloaks, Waists, Skirts, Wrappers, Silks and Dresses. N.H Skinner & Company or “Skinner’s” as it was often referred to by those who shopped there, continued to grow to become a fixture in downtown Taunton and one of the best-known landmarks in the city. After years of growth and expansion, by 1908 the Somerset Business Directory shows that N.H Skinner & Company sold almost anything in the clothing, linens, and home goods areas.

In the heart of downtown Taunton, N.H. Skinner & Company was “two stores, the one on the corner being one story and the other, three stories,” until 1905 when another story was added and an elevator installed. “The second floor of the store is used for women’s apparel and household furnishings,” explains an article celebrating the store’s 93rd anniversary, “while the street floor is made up of many different departments.” (Taunton Daily Gazette, October 8, 1937).

Evidence that the store catered largely toward female clientele can be detected from the items displayed in the window of an 1890 photo. According to long-time resident and Taunton historian Ruth Howland, the store she knew only as ‘Skinner’s was “a must-visit store for the fashionable women of Taunton.” N.H. Skinner & Company, Inc., had wall-to-wall thick green velvet carpet. The first thing shop goers would see was the jewelry display, maintained by long-time jewelry buyer Marion Wilmarth. Howland creates a descriptive map of the floor plan:

* A center aisle down behind the jewelry counter-right side laces and ribbons and the left side of the same case was underwear. To the left of the front door and turn a sharp right were gloves. The counter on the Cedar Street side of the store displayed fabrics for dress making including silks and satins to the fragile velvets. While the counter on the Union Street side housed domestic goods such as table and bedroom linens as well as a place where you had buttons covered. The sewing notion counter was between the Cedar Street counter and middle counter.

... continued on page ten
If not for Howland’s documentation of the department store, few details of the store’s interior would remain. Ruth Howland goes on to describe a vivid account of spending much of her first paycheck on ready-made fashions at N.H Skinner & Company: “Money, not a few miserly pennies…which I could exchange dreamed of loveliness. No homemade clothes for me now.” While items were not overly-priced, the purchase of goods from Skinner’s could compromise the financial resources of a shopper on a budget. Skinner’s had a reputation for the quality of the goods and products sold. After being chastised by her mother for spending half of her paycheck on her “perfectly tailored wool suite” Howland recounts the dress “wore for years and wore its aristocratic price to its last thread.”

Employees of N.H. Skinner were trained on sales strategies as well as superior customer service. While department stores were a fairly new concept during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the efforts to gain and maintain sales through training exercises speaks volumes about the level of professionalism Skinner & Company owners wanted to relay to the public. Floor walkers, cash boys, and a tube system throughout the store made payments easy and convenient. Some of the employees of N.H. Skinner are listed in the archives at the OCHS and include Jennie and Bertha Woodward, Bernice Gushee, and George Tew in bookkeeping. Henry McNally served as Supervisor of Tailored Suits. Other employees include Edwin Hills, Joseph Crawford, Chester Lovell, and Maud Babbit. There is also a record that in the summer months, all employees had a shorter workday on Fridays, as N.H. Skinner closed at noon (Gay 1999).

**CONCLUSION: LEGACY**

One of the marks of true success and longevity is a business’s ability to continue on beyond the life of their leader. Nathan Hack Skinner died in Taunton on May 13, 1897, about a month after the formal incorporation of N.H. Skinner & Company. After Skinner’s death the company’s Vice President, Henry G. Brownell assumed control while Brownell’s sons Louis E. and Brenton G. ran the business, as President and Treasurer, respectively. The solid foundation and respect that he had developed in his store, allowed it to continue for another generation.

Nathan Skinner’s personable demeanor and the loyalty he earned from his employees are just as important a legacy as the interesting and beautiful goods he sold at his store that are now preserved at the Old Colony Historical Society. This mutual respect between boss and employees shines through in his obituary which reads, “Mr. Skinner had a sagacious manner of surrounding himself with bright young men of evident business qualifications and retaining them, if possible, in his service.”

One of the “bright young men” who worked for Skinner was Cyrenius Adelbert Newcomb (1837-1915). Newcomb was educated at the Bridgewater Normal School (now Bridgewater State University) and joined N.H. Skinner as a clerk. Within nine years he had become a partner in the business, and later moved to Detroit where he became...
A 1937 article from the Taunton Gazette describes the N.H. Skinner & Company’s 93rd anniversary and a large sale to celebrate. Despite the happy occasion, the executives must have already been aware of the trouble brewing behind the scenes. N.H. Skinner & Company had enjoyed the growth and style of the early 20th century and survived the Great Depression. The introduction of ready-made fashions in American department stores resulted in sky rocketing success. N.H. Skinner was a perfect illustration of this. Despite the successes of small department stores during the first quarter of the 20th century, the economic downturn caused by the Great Depression was a ticking time bomb for many of these businesses across the country. By 1940, N.H. Skinner & Company is no longer listed in the Taunton business directories and the business was likely shuttered soon after.

Today, though no longer a destination of downtown Taunton, N.H. Skinner & Company continues to live on in the objects of the museum collection. The stories of the men and women who shopped at the store built by Nathan H. Skinner, and the objects that he sold, show us just what a lively and fashionable place Taunton came to be. While many towns throughout New England relied mostly on small general stores for the purchase of goods the fact that Taunton had not only a department store but also one of the most successful in New England is evidence that Taunton was a prosperous and progressive community. It is my hope that this article stresses the importance of preserving objects from the history of Taunton. If the garment labeled N.H. Skinner & Company in the collection of the Old Colony Historical Society had not survived, I would not be writing this article about this thriving business and center of community engagement, where employers and employees who loved their jobs and their city came together to promote a legacy to be admired, promoted, and replicated in any community.

SOURCES:
Our mission at the Old Colony Historical Society is to collect, care for, and interpret the history of the Taunton region, collaborating with the community to share meaningful connections between the past, the present, and the future.

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We are always looking to add to the holdings in The Hurley Library and appreciate the many supporters who make these additions possible.

Current items on our Wish List include:

- Tack Factory Cemetery and the People Burried at the Border of Middleboro and Lakeville, Massachusetts by Jean A. Douillette, $19.95
- Gravestone Locator for Lakeville, Massachusetts 1711-2003 by Jean A. Douillette, $9.95

We are also in need of:

- a new or gently-used vacuum cleaner
- flowers/plants for our outdoor containers (and any gardeners who would like to care for them in the spring!)
- mannequins or dress forms for upcoming textile displays

Thank you for your generosity!

MEET THE VOLUNTEERS ...

Renee Walker-Tuttle

RENEE WALKER-TUTTLE, born and raised in Brockton, MA, studied Anthropology and Fine Arts at Franklin Pierce University in Rindge, NH. She received an MS in Textile Conservation at University of Rhode Island Department of Textiles Fashion Merchandising and Design. In February of 2012 she successfully completed the two week intensive Southeastern Museum Conferences Jekyll Island Museum Management Institute (JIMI). Prior to completing her Master’s Degree Renee worked for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation as a Tailor creating historic costume reproductions for interpretive staff. She later was accepted into Colonial Williamsburg’s Dewitt-Wallace Conservation Center Pre-graduate Program in Conservation. While in graduate school she served as both Collections Assistant and Textile Conservation Lab Manager for URI’s Textile and Fashion Collection. She served as an intern for the New York State Battle Flag Project. Her experience with flag conservation led to a contract position with the Smithsonian National Museum of American History where she worked on the famous Star Spangled Banner Project. Renee is the current owner of Renaissance Textile Conservation services. In addition to working on individual contracts she has done conservation and consulting work for the International Tennis Hall of Fame & Museum, Newport Restoration Foundation and the Old Colony Historical Society. Renee continues to create historic costume reproductions and lecture for groups throughout New England on women’s 18th century dress. She joined the team of volunteers at the OCHS in April 2014 and is an invaluable member of our curatorial team.