

# Then and Now

Volume 13, Number 2

April 2012

## Roy Johnson's Remarkable Memory

*Bobbie Spiegelman, GHS Curator*

Whenever a question about Groton history pops up, the go-to guy is a lithe, eighty-three-year-old long-time resident of the town, Leroy E. (Roy) Johnson. He is most visible to me nowadays performing his part-time maintenance responsibilities at the Groton Public Library where he's been a mainstay for many decades, but his involvement in Groton and its history stretches across multiple arenas. One of his many interests centers on the Groton Historical Society, and we've chosen to capture his vast font of knowledge by recording his memories. We began an oral history project in February, 2010, and it continues to this day . . . without an end in sight.

When Kara Fossey and I started the process two years ago, we focused on Roy's own life story rather than his recollections of town events. We met Roy in the small conference room at the Groton Public Library, with our new-fangled digital recorder set up to freeze Roy's voice for posterity. More than a year later Liz Strachan and I picked up the project but not before we presented Roy with a new, more far-reaching theme: what makes Groton Groton. Roy accepted the challenge and came prepared for our first session with a stack of papers filled in with lists of names, places, organizations, and events—just about everything he could think of, and the lists are still growing even as we are embarking on our year anniversary.

Our recording equipment got fancier, too, with Dragon software to aid in the transcription of the sessions. Little did we know the challenges of recording Roy's Massachusetts twang and watching it miraculously spell out mysterious paragraphs of unreadable, nonsensical text. Roy, in his inimitable style of seen-it-all-and-not-get-flustered way of his, just sat back, chuckled and commented, "I guess we slew the d[D]ragon."



*Roy Johnson, standing casually on one of the floats of a Luscombe 8A seaplane on Newfound Lake, Bristol, NH, qualified as a seaplane pilot in July 1947. Photo courtesy of Roy Johnson.*

### Hometown Boy Has Long History

Roy's family ties go all the way back to the 17th century to John Nutting, an émigré from England to Groton who lost his life when the town was burned in 1676. All the future generations were fixtures in this town maintaining their small farms and learning skills to sustain themselves and their families. Roy's grandmother, Nina Johnson, kept the family farm (located off Kemp Street near the present-day Kirk Farm) running until after World War I when her sons abandoned farm life to pursue other careers. Roy was born in Ayer Hospital to Leroy E. Johnson and Claudia McClain in 1928. He started his young life living on Broadmeadow Road and then moved around to various other locales in town perhaps giving him his early start in learning Groton's geography. After completing his schooling in town, he left to go to Illinois to follow his childhood dream of becoming a pilot. He got his license but

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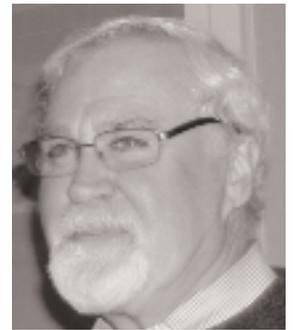
## 2 Main Street View: Sustaining the Future

As the United States and so many other countries struggle to keep their economy and unemployment in check, even the smallest non-profit has to take responsibility for the role it plays in its community. This is true for service agencies delivering food to the poor or local historical societies trying to save their town's history or cultural heritage.

The Groton Historical Society has recently offered several successful programs on both the history and culture of Groton. We enjoyed a three-part collaborative program on Groton's historic houses in conjunction with the Groton Public Library. We studied local archaeology with a tour of the Nate Nutting mill site led by archaeologist Marty Dudek. We heard John Tyler, art historian at Groton School, talk about Boston architect Henry Vaughan, designer of St. John's Chapel at Groton School, and before that, architect of the first Groton School chapel, a Gothic structure given in 1904 to the Catholic community to become Sacred Heart church. Tyler's program was presented at St John's Chapel to a capacity crowd eager to learn what fate was in store for the early chapel, now on the market as the Catholics in Groton are faced with a consolidation of their parishes and reduction of real estate [see C. David Gordon's review of this program and the architect Henry Vaughan in this issue]. There have also been GHS-sponsored exhibits at the Groton Library on the late lamented Groton Inn and Groton's role in the Civil War.

And while all this is going on the Society has been hard at work on renovating Boutwell House, which has been closed for the duration while contractors shore up the infrastructure with new plumbing and electrical lines and repair the roof and sections of the foundation in preparation for its reopening next fall. But beyond these activities there have been an amazing number of meetings among its board of directors and dedicated advisors related to the future of the Historical Society. These meetings are delving into its strategic and long-range planning, its governance, organizational structure, financial stability, and membership growth. We are asking friends and donors to give us candid information about our

strengths and weaknesses and how we might take advantage of new opportunities while struggling to address threats to our future well being.



### Can We Afford It?

How do we keep ourselves relevant and focused on the changing face of Groton? How do we go about offering programs for members and visitors that play to our community's strengths and its quality of life? How do we sustain the Society financially when many members are life members and no longer pay dues yet our operating costs increase? How do we fund the many important and significant educational programs, collection maintenance and conservation needs, and community service initiatives? And how do we develop future collections and exhibits and hire professional staff to manage all these endeavors?

The fact is we can't fund our future and we shouldn't even try without putting in place a well-structured, professionally led, comprehensively designed capital campaign. It must have a local leadership component second to none and a vision of the future that will assure success. And we will also need funds to increase our small endowment to sustain this entity for coming generations of Groton families.

In the next few months you will hear much more and I hope be challenged to help. Others groups have done it before, and we will do it this time. So accept our Membership Challenge (see page 4) and give a friend a membership and renew or upgrade your own as a first step onto the campaign ladder. And thanks for considering your role in our future.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "John H. Ott".

John H. Ott  
President, GHS  
April 2012

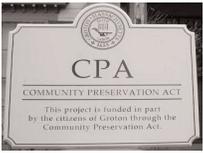
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Boutwell House is temporarily closed for renovations and will reopen in early fall 2012.

Please contact us by email with any questions at [info@grotonhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@grotonhistoricalsociety.org).  
Check our website at [www.grotonhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.grotonhistoricalsociety.org) for program announcements and other news.

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## Repairing Boutwell House

### Step 3: Coming into the 21st Century

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Alvin B. Collins, Project Manager  
*Boutwell House Rehabilitation Project*

The work goes on. Plumbing has been the main focus of work since my last update which will help to bring the Boutwell House into the 21st century. Over the years, a lot of the plumbing throughout the house has been repaired and/or patched in order to keep water flowing. Unfortunately plumbing, like most utilities, has a limited useful life expectancy that, in the case of this house's plumbing, had been outlived. Copper pipes had failing joints, shutoffs didn't work, and the cast iron waste pipes were slowly rotting out, causing leakage issues throughout the system. After touring a number of plumbers through the house with everyone having different opinions as to what should be done and where piping could be run, I selected a local contractor, the PK McGuane Plumbing and Heating Company of Ayer. Paul McGuane, the company owner and master plumber, has had extensive experience in commercial cast iron and copper plumbing fabrications and installations. He was able to address every one of my concerns regarding functionality while maintaining the historic value of the house interior by routing pipes in the least conspicuous places.

#### **New Plumbing in, Asbestos Out**

The rear ADA-accessible bathroom on the first floor has been laid out as originally planned to incorporate all that will be required to comfortably service visitors with varying disabilities. The room is large enough to accommodate a person in a wheelchair and will house fixtures designed to meet all of their needs. The accessible route to the bathroom will take shape as the inside finish work gets underway. On the second floor, next door to the new Society office, a half bath and washroom was plumbed. Since this bathroom is not on the main level it will not be ADA-accessible but is sufficiently sized to meet the needs of the Society staff and volunteers. During the entire rough plumbing process, PK McGuane was able to keep the apartment functional with only a short disruption of service during the changeover from old plumbing to new plumbing.

To meet the design of the new second-floor office bathroom and the future kitchen soapstone sink, two heat radiators had to be relocated. Before that could happen, asbestos had to be removed from a substantial section of the mid-basement heating pipes. This was done by A&E Environmental Inc., a small abatement company from Templeton, MA, who secures permitting, cautiously removes hazardous materials, tests the post-removal air quality and properly disposes of a number of hazardous



*Restored soapstone sink awaits custom cabinet and period faucets before installation in Boutwell House kitchen.  
Photo by Al Collins.*

materials including asbestos. Plumbers are not allowed to work on pipes that are wrapped in asbestos due to the possibility of creating asbestos dust in the process.

All of the new radiator piping is now in place but the radiators will not be reinstalled until they are painted and interior finish wood trim is installed and painted. We are sending out the radiators to be sandblasted to remove the years of paint applied over and over to the point that paint doesn't stick any more. Typically back in Governor Boutwell's day, heating radiators were painted silver, a color said to dissipate heat better than any other color. So once the radiator paint is stripped off, we will have them painted silver before installation.

#### **Soapstone Sink Found, Wood-Burning Stove Sought**

John Ott, our Society president, searched successfully for an authentic period soapstone sink to fulfill the dream of bringing the Boutwell House kitchen back to a functioning period kitchen that can be showcased as part of the museum collection. We have purchased a beautifully restored soapstone kitchen sink from Erickson's Antique Stoves in Littleton, MA, but installation will await the construction of a period-looking base cabinet for it to sit on. Erickson's will also be supplying period faucets to be fitted to the sink, making the new sink truly a piece of New England's historic past. The sink's soapstone has roots close to home, having been quarried in southern New Hampshire and fabricated into a sink housed in a 19th century New Hampshire farmhouse.

To top off the kitchen's functionality, John has his eye on a certain restored wood-burning stove of a design similar to the one originally in the Boutwell House kitchen,

*continued on page 4*

## 4 *Repairing Boutwell House* continued from page 3

and he has hopes of raising money to purchase this stove. Having a functional 1850's kitchen will be a great educational tool to engage children in learning how their great-great-great grandparents lived. Anyone willing to support the purchase of this beautiful stove with a donation should contact John at [jhott2@juno.com](mailto:jhott2@juno.com) to enable the kitchen to be functional once the project is complete.

### **Fire-Suppression System is Next**

Once the rough plumbing was complete, fire-suppression sprinkler companies had an opportunity to bid on the fire-suppression system that will be paid for through the Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund grant the Society recently was awarded. The company I've selected is Fire Sprinkler Systems from Richmond, NH, which not only came in with the lowest bid but has experience working within a museum structure. The company's engineer spent several hours in the house under my supervision, mapping out locations of riser pipes and sprinkler heads trying to minimize disruption to the house interior. Sprinkler heads and some piping will be visible in every room but this will be a small price to pay for the ability to protect both the historic house and extensive collections against being destroyed by fire as was our cherished Groton Inn.

We have also started the electrical service upgrades with the first component being new circuit breaker panels in the basement that will feed the main house and the apartment separately. Rand O'Grady Electric from



*Electrician pulls new electric service wire for Boutwell House through underground conduit installed last December.  
Photo by Al Collins.*

Groton will be installing new breaker panels which will eliminate the present hazard of non-code-compliant panels located in hazardous locations such as below heating system water pipes. Once a new main service wire is fed into the house underground from the street, the electrician will start upgrading circuits in the house and apartment. All in all since my last update in February, Boutwell House has become much safer and will be much more useful when it opens in the fall as a thoroughly updated, modernized version of its grand old self.

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## *Did You Know.....*

... that among the hundreds of pieces of china belonging to the Boutwell family are several pieces given to Miss Georgianna Boutwell by Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant? These include a "soup plate" that was part of the official White House china during the Grant administration, a cup and saucer brought from Japan by Mrs. Grant, and another cup and saucer given originally to Mrs. Grant by General Grant before he became President Grant. These gifts reflect the cordial relationship between the Boutwells and the Grants. Governor Boutwell served in President Grant's Cabinet as Secretary of the Treasury from 1869 to 1873. It was in June of 1869 that President Grant came to Groton to visit his new Treasury Secretary and spent the night at Boutwell House.

--E. S.

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## MEMBERSHIP CHALLENGE – BE A GHS CHAMPION

As the Society prepares to reopen Boutwell House to the public later this year, we challenge all present members to help us double our membership numbers by year's end. Just bring in at least one new member this year to help us celebrate when we dedicate Boutwell House as Groton's history center. All new members--and their recruiting Champions--will be recognized in October in the celebratory issue of *Then and Now*. Thank you all. Let the Games begin.

*John Ott, President, and Peter Benedict, Membership Chairman*

*C. David Gordon, GHS Vice President*

Months after the town lost Groton Inn to fire, attention has turned to another beleaguered Main Street landmark, the former Sacred Heart church building, once part of the Sacred Heart/St. James Parish, now closed and for sale. The Historical Society's February 5th program, devoted to the history of this church building, drew an audience of well over a hundred – by far the Society's best-attended event to date. Many former Sacred Heart parishioners came to be reminded of the past and learn more about the future of the 125-year-old structure that was the first Groton School chapel.

It was significant that the program was held in St. John's Chapel at Groton School, the large limestone edifice that is the present school chapel. John Tyler of the Groton School History Department and director of its de Menil Gallery began the Sacred Heart story by telling the story of its architect Englishman Henry Vaughan (1845-1917) and his abiding love for Gothic revival buildings. Vaughan brought the Gothic revival style with him to America in 1880. Tyler showed slides to illustrate how the original chapel fit into a period in church architecture where structures were made to "look English."

This architectural style with its soaring interiors, distinctive buttresses, arches, and groin-vaulted ceilings directed the worshiper's eyes upward. Groton School's first chapel, built in 1887, echoed something of this in its small space while taking as its model English cottage architecture. It had half-timbered exterior walls, windows located high up in the building, a steep roof with a small and pointed belfry, and stenciling on interior sanctuary walls suggesting the interior of 15th-century English churches. When Groton School had replaced it with the larger St. John's Chapel, the outgrown building was given by its



*Sacred Heart Church in 2005, before its use as a parish church was discontinued. Photo by C. David Gordon.*

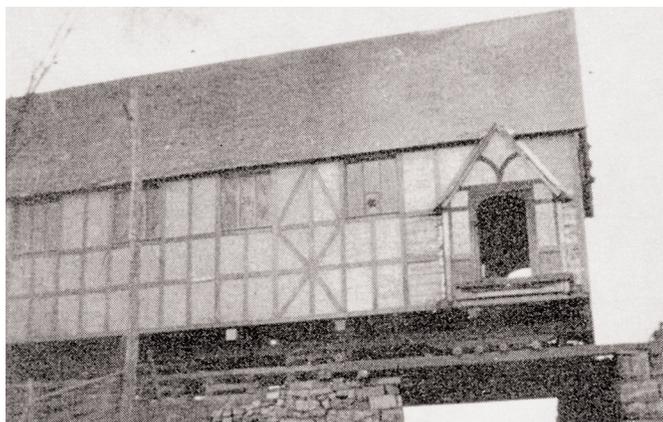
benefactor William Amory Gardner to the Catholic community in town. It was literally rolled to its present location on Main Street in 1904 and became Sacred Heart Church. The new chapel at Groton School was also a gift of William Gardner, nephew of Isabella Stewart Gardner and her husband John L. Gardner.

Groton School had made a 25-foot addition to the old chapel in 1891. The school retained some of its Tiffany windows before allowing the building to be moved away. The relocated building still has its half-timbered walls, except for the clapboarded south front of the building and a different main entrance. Inside the sacristy has been enlarged, Tyler said.

## **Future of Sacred Heart Church Uncertain**

Following Tyler's presentation, Thomas More College President William Edmund Fahey, Ph.D., explained what hopes the college has for the Sacred Heart Church building. Surprisingly, he said the college had first been interested in moving the church building to the institution's present location in Merrimack, NH. The former chapel aroused in college officials an interest in this area. With Groton chosen as the new location for the entire college, the hope became to "move the chapel home in a way" – place it on the future college campus on the corner of Peabody Street and Old Ayer Road close to where it had originally been built -- and to operate the building as a place of worship.

The college, though, must "look for a new Mr. Gardner" like the individual who paid for both chapels at Groton School. The Archdiocese of Boston has placed the building and land on the market, and the college remains "in negotiations" to obtain the building. Meanwhile it has recently been reported that the property, both land and building, might be purchased anonymously and donated to the town for nonprofit and commercial uses. What becomes of these plans we must wait and see.



*On September 27, 1904, the former Groton School chapel was horse-drawn on rollers down Farmers Row and West Street across a narrow bridge over the railroad tracks to its new home at 297 Main Street. Photo courtesy of Sacred Heart Church.*

## 6 Remarkable Memory *continued from page 1*

couldn't compete with the trained pilots who were returning home from fighting in WWII. He returned to his hometown and trained as a toolmaker eventually becoming supervisor for the experimental shop at GenRad where he worked for over 30 years.

Working off his voluminous list of memories, we decided to start the next phase of our project with a focus on agriculture. Roy started in with naming all the proprietors of apple orchards in town, both large and small. One could almost smell the pervasive scent of blossoms in spring and take in the vision of trees laden with glistening red apples at harvest time, there were so many. As a young boy, Roy helped out with the apple picking, along with many other of his contemporaries, and he once had the opportunity to work alongside German soldiers who were lent out as labor from Fort Devens where they were being held as prisoners during the war. Our agricultural landscape also included many farms of various acreages and some of the families of the larger ones took in children who were wards of the state to help with the work. The mention of these children, some of whom were befriended by Roy in his days at the Boutwell Elementary School, surfaced in the conversation as Roy's details came to life with anecdotes that fleshed out the stories behind the facts.

As Liz and I learned more about Roy's elementary school days, we heard about the monkey and other exotic pets being kept by Ev Cleary in his basement in his house on Main Street. Ev's sister, Celia, was the fourth-grade teacher in town, and she provided the link for her students to spend some Sunday afternoon hours in Ev's basement taking in the zoo. The monkeys weren't the only exotics in town, either, Roy told us. He got to feed hamburger on a stick to the two alligators living at Reg Hueber's expansive greenhouse on Groton School's campus where his father

worked after he lost his post office job.

This brief look back at Groton over 70 years ago conjures up images of a town quite different than the one we know today. Weekly home deliveries of ice cut from frozen Wattles Pond helped to preserve food that might have been purchased from a local Pepperell farmer who drove his blue truck with the fancy yellow wooden-spoked wheels through the downtown neighborhoods on a regular basis selling his vegetables. A few decades later, food stores popped up all over the town providing convenience to a populace that didn't necessarily own cars and walked or took any of a variety of public transportation offerings accessible from many points in town to do their shopping, go to work or go off for a day of pleasure. Can you picture a couple snowshoeing down a snow-covered Main Street, changing into their fancy clothes in what is now a bank parking lot to go dancing at Town Hall until the wee hours of the morning?

### **New Ways to Tell Groton's Story**

As we undergo the renovation of the Boutwell House and reconfigure our use of the space in the best way to capture Groton's history, we recognize the importance of presenting our story from its beginning and to stay cognizant of more recent history as well. There is no better source than Roy to fill in parts of the early to mid-20th century, tapping his remarkable memory.

Roy's memories are helping us to imagine how we will tell Groton's story in our new space, giving us many ideas about programs, exhibits and other opportunities through which to deepen our knowledge. We're very appreciative of the many, many hours he's offered to us over the past year to get this story right and keep it alive.



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## *The State of Agriculture in Groton*

*In 1771 Groton had 297 farmers but only 198 a hundred years later. The number of working oxen dropped from 372 to 32 in that time and the sheep count dropped from 1144 to 139. Meanwhile milk cows and cattle doubled from 652 to 1295, horses increased from 145 to 311, and the amount of hay harvested to feed these animals went from 1807 tons to 4452 tons. The numbers come from 19th-century census data collected in 1771, 1850, and 1880—the “heyday of farming” in Groton. Today farming in our town has a different story to tell, as the Groton Agricultural Survey described here by GHS board member Michael Roberts makes clear. Mike was Agricultural Survey Project Manager for the CPA-funded study of past and present*

*farming in Groton, a project conceived by the Groton Historical Commission in collaboration with the Groton Planning Board, the Groton Agricultural Commission, the Williams Barn Committee, the Groton Historical Society, and the Groton Grange.*

In January 2012, the Groton Historical Commission announced the satisfactory completion of its project to develop a comprehensive history of agriculture and farming in Groton and Groton Plantation. The three-part project was implemented by Oakfield Research of Concord, MA, with the goal to inform the citizens of Groton and the

*continued on page 7*



Visitors to Williams Barn on August 12, 2011, were welcomed to an exhibit celebrating the history and diversity of agriculture in Groton. The town-owned barn on Chicopee Row, which dates to 1840, has been carefully restored to serve as learning center, museum for farm implements, and trailhead for trails on town conservation lands. Photo by C. David Gordon.

Commonwealth about the long tradition of agriculture and farming as well as its importance to the past, present and future of our community. Section I of the Survey, called “Groton Farms: Understanding the past and planning for the future of agriculture in Groton,” traces farming and agriculture from the time of Native American farming of these lands over the past four centuries to establishing the context for thinking about farming today and into the future. Complete with images and maps the report leaves Groton readers with a clearer understanding of how farming and agriculture has been the backdrop against which the Town grew and responded to regional, national and international trends and other

events not necessarily related to agriculture. An Appendix to Section 1, called “Conversations with Groton Farmers,” is a fascinating collection of interviews with present-day farmers.

The second component of the Groton Farms project is a photo exhibit originally displayed at Williams Barn on August 12, 2011, during one of the Friday afternoon Farmer’s Market days. The portable exhibit, containing many old and new photos of Groton farm lands and activities, was very well received and is available for display at other venues.

The third part of the project (Section II of the written Survey) is a list of resources for new and seasoned farmers alike. Called a “Resource Guide for Local Farmers: Where to turn when you have more questions than answers,” it covers a variety of subjects--The Beginning Farmer, Land, Financial Sources and Resources, Organic Farming, Insurance and Risk Management, Energy, Newsletters, Reports, and Periodicals, Specialty Farming, and Agricultural Support Organizations.

The Survey is posted on the town website ([www.townof-groton.org](http://www.townof-groton.org)). Hard copies have been presented to town officials and others, and CDs containing text and illustrations are being distributed to every farmer in Groton. For more information and/or a copy of the CD (if you are a Society member), contact Michael Roberts at 978-758-1999. If you are not yet a member, please become one and receive your free CD while they last.

## Board of Directors 2011-2012 (and committee assignments)

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 Michael F. Flynn, Treasurer  
 Elizabeth Strachan, Clerk,  
 also Nominating/Governance

Peter Benedict, Membership  
 Tom Callahan, Programs  
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 Kristin S. Kramer, Buildings & Grounds  
 Barbara Murray, Newsletter  
 Lili Ott, Hospitality  
 Michael Roberts, Long-Range Planning  
 Bobbie Spiegelman, Curator/Collections

Advisors to the Board  
 Alvin Collins, CPA Project Manager  
 Valerie Jenkins and Ed Strachan, Finance  
 Ray Lyons, Counsel

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### MEMBERSHIP FORM

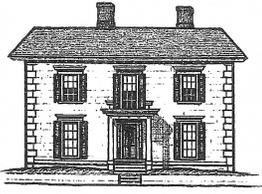
Annual Member--individual or family	\$35
GHS Sponsor	\$75
Corporate Sponsor	\$250
Sustaining Member	\$1000
Additional Tax-Deductible Contribution	\$_____

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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# Groton Historical Society

172 Main Street, P.O. Box 202  
Groton, MA 01450

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Then and Now

Volume 13, Number 2 April 2012

## Upcoming Programs

### **Tuesday May 1: Taste and Technology: The Impact of the Industrial Revolution on Domestic Furnishings, 1820-1860**

7:00 PM • Sibley Hall • Groton Public Library

#### **Presented by the Groton Historical Society and the Groton Public Library**

Jane C. Nylander, President Emerita of Historic New England (formerly the Society for Preservation of New England Antiquities), will describe the effects on home decoration in the 19th century brought about by mechanized factory production of textiles, furniture, ceramics, glass, prints, wallpaper, and other household goods. For the first time, a wide range of furnishings was available at modest prices and home decoration has never been the same. Thanks to a grant from the Groton Commissioners of Trust Funds, the program is free and open to the public. Refreshments will be served.

### **Sunday May 6: *Birds of Groton & Ayer* Revisited**

2:00 PM • NRWA Resource Center • 592 Main St., Groton, MA

#### **Presented by the Groton Historical Society and the Nashua River Watershed Association**

Clayton Hobart, ornithologist, will tell us about recent changes in the bird population of the Groton/Ayer area. Mr. Hobart will reference both the 2011 MassAudubon report, *The State of the Birds* and the beloved field guide *Birds of Groton & Ayer* by the late Bertrand D. Hopkins, Groton physician and ardent bird watcher. Published in 1995, Bert's book contains 60 years of personal observations of bird activity in and around Groton and Ayer. Thanks to a grant from the Groton Commissioners of Trust Funds, the program is free and open to the public. Refreshments will be served.

See [www.grotonhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.grotonhistoricalsociety.org) for more details on these and other GHS programs.