

Then and Now

Volume 15, Number 4

Fall 2014

Newsletter of the Groton Historical Society [Est. 1894]

GHS Joins Conversation on Historic Preservation in Groton

Bobbie Spiegelman, GHS Curator

Evanesence. All things worthy of restoration are so because we are seeing them as they pass, each in its own time. From years to eons---houses, waterfalls, trees, and the earth itself.

--Howard Mansfield

With all the discussion these days about what to do with several prominent old buildings in town, the Historical Society thought it might have an opportune moment to step into the action. Our motives were self-serving to the extent that with our newly renovated headquarters, the Governor Boutwell House, with exhibits installed and the 19th century kitchen sparkling with its “new” old stove and soapstone sink, we thought we needed to be one of the voices, especially since these town buildings have a history.

Our program committee landed on an idea borrowed from another historical society/library collaboration using Howard Mansfield’s books, *In the Memory House* and *The Same Ax, Twice: Restoration and Renewal in a Throwaway Age*. Once we lined up Groton Public Library as a partner, we invited interested readers to experience the ideas

presented in the books and invited the author, Howard Mansfield, to speak to our community with funding provided by the library through the town’s Lecture Funds. The theme of the two-part project was titled: How does history shape the character of Groton: A conversation about the future of our town seen through the lens of history.

Part one was a panel discussion held at Legion Hall on September 30, and it surpassed expectations. The audience, composed of many faces new to GHS events, responded to the perspectives provided by Selectman Stuart Schulman, furniture-builder Peter Benedict, GHS administrator Kara Fossey, and from the high school, history teacher Tammie Reynolds and junior Katie Ferro. Al Collins, GHS vice president and chair of the building and grounds committee, also former chair of the town Historical Commission, was both moderator and participant in the discussion. It was clear that there is great interest in deciding the future of the idle structures in town and many spoke about the need to make the best use of the buildings with community, character and history in mind. We concluded the evening with a plea to continue the conversation.

Our chosen author, gearing up for part two of this pioneering program, was impressed with the discussion so far, seen through the magic of technology (via videotape of the panel discussion available on The Groton Channel), and fashioned his talk at the library on October 14 to coincide with ideas expressed at the Legion Hall event. The crowd in the audience, including many students from the high school, tapped into his expertise about restoration. One question about the best argument for restoring a building instead of replacing it drew a response from the speaker to refer back to his 14 points at the end of *Same Ax, Twice*, which he called “Some Concluding Restoration Principles, Pleas, and Prayers.” He might have been thinking about point #2:

The Future. Good restoration schools us in the graces of the old ways, freeing us to build anew. When we bring our loving attention to that which is old, it is not the past we are restoring but the future. Good restoration saves the future.



GHS curator Bobbie Spiegelman shares thoughts with author Howard Mansfield at the close of the library book talk. Photo by C. David Gordon.

May we, the Groton Historical Society, continue to be part of the conversation. ☐

Main Street View: Participating, Sharing, Collaborating, and Celebrating -- The Work of GHS

These four words reflect the work of the Groton Historical Society in the last few months as we continue to reach out to the community.



Participating: Beginning with Riverfest in June, Al Collins, Mike Roberts and volunteers joined with the Groton Greenway Commission in producing interpretive signs to describe the history and archaeology still in evidence at the Petapawag Landing area. On

September 20, the Society again took part in Grotonfest, the town's annual fall festival, sharing its space with the Fort Devens Museum and offering hands-on apple peeling demonstrations for adults and children. Apples and fruit have played an important role in the agricultural history of our town.

Sharing: One of the real opportunities the GHS has through its mission to preserve and protect Groton's written and physical past is to make its artifact collection and archival records available to researchers, students, scholars and members. Almost every day of the week we receive calls for help with genealogical and historical queries about families, homes, or businesses that were once or are still here today. Often people just show up at the Boutwell House looking for help, folks from far-flung towns with family names like Tarbell, Farnsworth, Longley, and Shattuck. They are looking for information related to their roots or to do research on some aspect of someone's life who once lived here, made a name for himself and moved on. But each query is a window on some aspect of our town's multifaceted past, and we love helping to provide a clearer view to that past.

Collaborating: Another rewarding aspect of the work of the GHS is the opportunity to partner with other town entities to share meeting space and marketing resources as well as to promote ideas that help citizens appreciate the legacy they have in their buildings, history, and agrarian past. Just weeks ago, in conjunction with the Groton Public Library

hosted a panel discussion at Legion Hall around the question, "How does history shape the character of Groton?" It was an amazing interactive program with a diverse representation of residents, old and young, lifelong and relatively new, involving teachers, students, GHS members, and town officials. It generated insightful questions and answers, raised town issues that both old and young agreed were important and made it obvious that by sharing, collaborating, and working together we can define common elements that make us all Grotonians whether native or newly arrived. The fruitful discussion continued two weeks later when author and historian Howard Mansfield spoke on the same topics at the library (see page 1).

The Society also had the great fortune to have a new public garden created for the Governor Boutwell House through the generosity and shared efforts of the Groton Garden Club, the Groton Woman's Club, and the Friends of the Trees -- another example of community teamwork and shared interests for which the Society is most grateful.

Celebrating: The GHS was represented in style at two notable events in neighboring towns recently. To mark the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War, we arranged to lend a dozen objects from our permanent collection to the Leominster Public Library for its thought-provoking exhibit on the war's impact on the region. Among the GHS artifacts on display from August 23 to October 10 this year were a military cap, a pair of epaulettes, the carpet bag carried by Dr. Samuel A. Green when he was serving as a surgeon in the Civil War, a powder flask, and several documents from the time. And on a bright sunny day in September, the Historical Society's Town Hearse traveled to Littleton to join that town's 300th Anniversary parade where it was enjoyed by almost 10,000 people (see page 8). It was a fun and joyful occasion that tied our towns together, and it reminds me that we have a lot to celebrate every day because we live in a town whose rich history makes us proud and where citizens and students alike can share in the Society's work and help the town continue to make history.

*John H. Ott
GHS President
Fall 2014*

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Highlights of the GHS 2014 Annual Meeting

Liz Strachan, Clerk

On Sunday afternoon, October 5, the day of the GHS Annual Meeting, Society President John Ott welcomed us to the front parlor of Boutwell House to hear a talk on the newly installed side garden from GHS member and Groton Garden Club past president Penny Hommeyer. But first on the agenda were several business items and reports.

In short order, the minutes of last year's Annual Meeting were accepted and the Treasurer's Report for the current year, delivered by Stuart Shuman, was unanimously approved. The Society is maintaining a balance of about \$18,000 in the checking account, and the Endowment Fund has grown to more than \$204,000 from a bit more than \$174,600 a year ago. Total income for the fiscal year was about \$19,700.

Officers and board members were approved (see full list of board members and their committee assignments on page 7), and John recognized three former board members who have stepped down from the Board but remain involved with the Society: Anna Eliot, Tom Callahan, and Kris Kramer. He also expressed the Society's appreciation to longtime member Audrey Bryce who for many years oversaw the awarding of the Sheedy Scholarships on the Society's behalf to worthy high school students.

Two standing committees, Education and Development, are still in need of chairmen, but other committees, especially the program committee, are increasingly active. Recent programs have included a panel discussion on how history shapes the character of Groton, a talk by Howard Mansfield at the Library on October 14, and a presentation by John Bunker, apple expert, at the First Parish Church of Westford on October 29. The apple talk was in conjunction with the Littleton and Westford historical societies.

In his President's Report, John summarized the Society's many accomplishments in the past year. Above all, the condition of the Boutwell House has been stabilized, made possible with support from the Town of Groton and the State of Massachusetts. The renovations have made it possible, in turn, to prepare exhibits for viewing and to open the house to visitors on a regular basis. Our consultant Kara Fossey, board members, and volunteers have done much work to identify more fully what is in our collection and to better organize our documents, photos, and objects. This work will be ongoing. Several authors and members of the public have made use of our documents and records to engage in research on their particular interests. John emphasized that to help the Society realize its full potential to tell the many stories of Groton as gleaned from our collection, we will need to engage in more formal fundraising.

Michael Roberts made two reports, the first on the

status of the Society's Long-Range Plan drawn up three years ago. We have successfully managed to keep the Society running while the rehabilitation work on Boutwell House was going on, he said, and now we are in the midst of determining how to more fully carry out our mission.

He is recasting the remaining goals to include what committees would like to accomplish during the next five years and is asking the Board as a whole to express a wish list for the next 10 years. The revised plan will be a working document that can be adjusted as needed and be used to help us develop our annual budgets.

Michael also described the happy results of the Milestone Restoration Project of the Groton Historical Commission. Repairing or replacing all 27 of the mile markers originally installed by the GHS in 1902 and 1903 on all roads leading into Groton was a key component of the project, funded by a CPA grant. The stones gave the distance to Town Hall. Some of them had become illegible and most were hidden from view by overgrown brush that has now been cut down. Michael challenged us to see how many of the refurbished mile markers we could find as we drive around town.

With the Society's business accomplished, we were introduced to our featured speaker Penny Hommeyer, a hands-on participant in bringing a beautiful new garden to Boutwell House. Penny mentioned the many sites around town that the Garden Club maintains—the Constance Wharton Garden beside Town Hall, the Hollis Street traffic island, Prescott and Sawyer commons, and the former horse watering troughs in West Groton and Groton Center, and others. This is in keeping with the club's mission to beautify the town, she said. Then she described in detail the



Penny Hommeyer, featured speaker at the GHS Annual Meeting, described the collaborative efforts of the Garden Club, Woman's Club, and Friends of the Trees in creating a new garden at the side of the Boutwell House. Photo by C. David Gordon.

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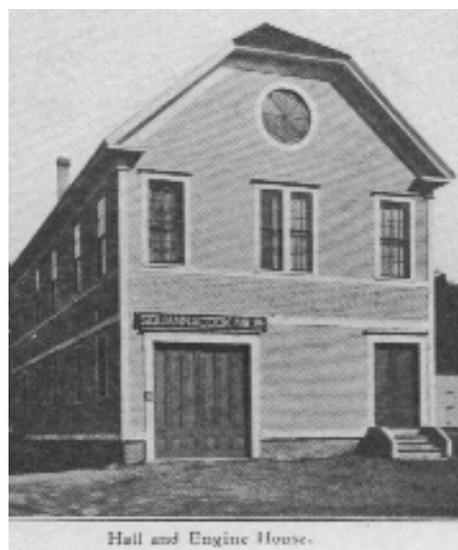
Historic Preservation on the Line in Groton: Saving Old Buildings a Tricky Balancing Act

By Deborah Johnson

GHS member and guest contributor Deborah Johnson is founding editor and publisher of The Groton Herald, our town's paper of record. As a journalist Deborah has observed and reported on many changes in the town over the last 30 years and poses this important question about the future of our historic buildings – are we as a town doing all we can to preserve our architectural heritage for future generations?

Longtime Groton residents may like to think that the look of the town remains a constant. Certainly, preserving Gibbet Hill from massive housing developments has protected the view along Main Street of the bucolic scene of Black Angus cows grazing on this most iconic setting. Groton, however, is not a museum and Main Street, as well as other older parts of town, undergoes renovation, redevelopment, and change all the time.

Groton is dotted with old buildings, both public and private, that have been restored, recycled and reused for current needs and purposes. Right now there are six properties—the Groton Inn, Blood Farm, Squannacook Hall, the old center fire station, and Tarbell and Prescott schools—that are on the cusp of new life and new futures, but they are certainly not the first or only buildings to go through such a metamorphosis. Earlier examples of new uses include the old Leatherboard building in West Groton (now RiverCourt Residences), Boutwell School on Hollis Street (now Groton's Early Childhood Center), and Williams Barn on Chicopee Row (now home to the town Farmers Market and legacy of Groton's agricultural past).



*Squannacook Fire Station.
Photo from Groton at 350 archives.*

Each of these instances has demonstrated that a future for old structures is possible by managing a delicate balance between changing needs vs. maintaining the past, cost of restoration vs. cost of demolition, and public vs. private interests.

These balancing acts are not always so easy to perform. Much of the time it is private owners who have to make the commitment to steward their property for future generations, and no one can predict how quickly circumstances can change. The August 2011 fire that destroyed the ancient Groton Inn was a very sudden change, as was the fire that destroyed the main building at Blood Farm in January 2014. In both these instances the buildings and businesses were private and therefore subject to the decisions of the owners. The Blood family has been working to rebuild and reopen their business which has a history going back five generations in West Groton. The building itself was not particularly important historically, but the business is and will continue to be not only for those employed there but also for the farm-to-table markets and restaurants which depend on this local enterprise to deliver high-quality meats for their businesses.

The loss of the Groton Inn is felt more keenly because the building, with its multiple additions of earlier structures, had historic significance beyond the business. It was a landmark on Main Street, but there again, it was privately owned and therefore, the future of the site, to a large degree, is in the hands of the new owners. Town Meeting voters may have an opportunity to vote on a concept plan for the site's development but final decisions will rest with the owners and their architects and with relevant town boards such as the Planning Board, Historic Districts Commission, and the Conservation Commission.

Town-Owned Buildings Present Different Challenge

The story is somewhat different for four buildings which are currently town-owned and whose future is only beginning to emerge. Tarbell and Prescott schools are no longer being used by the school district as classrooms. These buildings were rented for district use from the town. Construction of a new center fire station means the old building on Station Avenue needs to be repurposed, and Squannacook Hall is about to undergo its third incarnation since its original construction as the West Groton Firehouse in 1887. Each building in its time was a much-touted solution to a particular need.

Squannacook Hall: In 1886 a permanent fire company was established for West Groton and named Squannacook Engine Company. A year later the engine house, called "The Hall" was built to house one fire engine and to act as a meeting place for civic events. In 1958 The Hall was replaced as a firehouse by construction across the street of

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the current Squannacook Engine and Hose Company #2 building. In the 1990s Squannacook Hall was used for programs under the auspices of the now defunct Recreation Department, but the lack of parking, low ceilings and general inaccessibility made the building not a good fit for those kinds of activities. The town-owned building has stood idle for a number of years and may turn out to be the first of the four to have a clearly laid out plan for its future.

Halsey Platt, principal of Platt Builders, a design and construction company specializing in renovation and restoration of antique buildings and houses, brought to the fall 2013 town meeting a plan to purchase Squannacook Hall and reconfigure it into residential apartments. The neighboring Christian Union Church community, which had been using Squannacook Hall land for church parking purposes, objected to the plan and it was defeated at town meeting. Demolition seemed imminent, but Groton is one of a number of towns in Massachusetts which has a bylaw to protect old buildings from possible demolition by postponing the action to see if there is any chance to repurpose the structure. The process starts when the property owner (private or public) applies to the building department to get a permit for razing. When the building department receives a request to raze an old building, it can turn over the request to the Historical Commission (not to be confused with the Historical Society or Historic Districts Commission), which holds a public hearing and tries to find ways to preserve the building. In the case of Squannacook Hall, Mr. Platt and church members were given a 180-day period to rethink demolition and work out a plan that both parties could accept.



Odd Fellows Hall, built in the early 20th century, became the Center Fire Station in 1940. Photos are from Groton at 350 archives

The intent of the Demolition Delay bylaw is to give people time to put together an alternate plan, and as Town Manager Mark Haddad commented, “It absolutely works.” At spring 2014 town meeting voters supported the new plan which makes accommodations for the church’s

parking needs while retaining the four one-bedroom rental apartments that were originally proposed.

Old Center Fire Station: No threat of demolition hangs over the old center fire station on Station Ave. but it too has a history of more than one use. The Odd Fellows, a fraternal organization, built Lodge No. 95 of the International Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F) in 1915 as a meeting place, but eventually they moved out of town and in 1940 the building was sold to the town to be converted into Groton Engine and Hose Company #1. Today with the opening of a new center fire station on Farmers Row, the old building is in line for another makeover.

It is generally agreed that the building has aesthetic as well as historical merit and deserves to have a new future. Certainly the town believes so and thus Selectmen issued a RFP for plans to purchase and renovate the building. A Groton couple was one of six respondents and came up with the plan which received Selectmen’s approval. The proposal is to rework the first-floor space to accommodate an area where prepared food can be purchased, another area for sale of local produce, and a third area for bicycle rentals/sales, and public bathrooms. The second floor would contain one or two small apartments.

This plan addresses several of the goals of the Town Center Overlay District, a zoning bylaw written to shape new construction on Station Avenue. It is mixed use, pedestrian-friendly, and complements the nearby Rail Trail. But approval of the proposal is only the first of many steps before work can begin on this renovation.

Groton Attorney Robert Collins has been guiding the



couple through numerous town boards’ reviews and hearings in order to obtain all necessary waivers and approvals to make the plan acceptable, a process not for the faint of heart. Collins says, “Successful rehabilitation of existing buildings requires economic viability of the proposed use

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Historic Buildings *Continued from page 5*

[or uses], the vision and good sense to come up with a design which is appropriate and will work [and be approved], and the money and fortitude to navigate one's way through the approval process." Still to do: hearings for a Special Permit under the Overlay District Bylaw, and only with that approval, actual construction.

Tarbell School: To replace the aging Tarbell Schoolhouse on West Main Street, a new school, also named Tarbell, was opened in September 1914 to provide elementary school classrooms needed once Butler School (predecessor of Prescott School) became a high school only and Chaplin School (now Legion Hall) was deemed too unsafe for schoolroom use. This new, bright school building became the centerpiece of West Groton village which had grown up around the two manufacturing plants, the Leatherboard, and Hollingsworth & Vose. Generations of West Groton pupils walked to the neighborhood school before being bused to the high-school campus on Main Street. When the then school superintendent announced that Tarbell would have to close as a cost-cutting measure, West Groton parents were outraged and started private fundraising to keep the school open. In spite of their efforts the school classrooms were closed in 1991 and the children were sent to Florence Roche School on the Main Street campus. In 1994 the new superintendent moved school administration offices to Tarbell and it resumed useful service until about 2010 when the offices moved to Prescott School.



*Tarbell School (above) and Prescott School (below).
Photos by C. David Gordon.*



The school district released Tarbell back to the town, and Selectmen have pursued several RFP offerings with limited success. Tarbell's future is still uncertain depending on whether the latest prospective buyer's plans are well received by Selectmen and other interested town boards. Interest in preserving and repurposing this old school building seems limited at this time.

Prescott School: This is also the case with Prescott School which, of all the buildings mentioned here, has the most prominent place on Groton's Main Street, and therefore, draws the most attention from residents. Prescott School also has the longest history between concept and construction of any of the other buildings discussed. Prescott (known as Groton High School until 1975 when it was renamed for Colonel William Prescott) was built on the site of, and as a replacement for, Butler High School which had been erected in 1871, a watershed year for the town as the last section of the original town, Groton Junction, separated and became the town of Ayer. The need for a high school was predicated on the 1860 state law requiring all communities to provide a secondary education. Groton was not particularly interested in having its children go to school beyond the elementary grades and was not in the least interested in spending money on a new school building. It took concerted effort on the part of a few education advocates to purchase the land and build the Gothic Victorian, three-story, wooden school building.

Once built, however, Butler School, named for Groton's first historian Caleb Butler, became a source of town pride, until it was damaged by a fire and razed in 1927 to make room for a substantial brick structure that became Prescott School. It provided both elementary and high school classrooms until 1962 when a new high school opened further down Main Street (now Middle School North). When the school district regionalized with Dunstable in 1975, classroom overcrowding meant Prescott School continued to be needed to ease congestion in the elementary schools. Its classroom space became redundant only when the present new high school was built on Chicopee Row, the former high school was refitted as one half of the middle school complex now housing grades five to eight, and additions were made to Swallow Union School in Dunstable and Florence Roche School in Groton. Prescott is currently leased to the district for administrative offices, but the lease is up in August 2015.

With this deadline in mind and with the growing cost of heating and maintaining the building, Selectmen appointed a Prescott Reuse Committee to investigate possible uses for the building and to survey residents' views on the building's future. Survey results were emphatically opposed to

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Annual Meeting *Continued from page 3*

special project the club undertook this year—to install a garden of historically accurate plantings at the side of the Boutwell House at the club’s own expense. The Garden Club collaborated with the Groton Woman’s Club and the Friends of the Trees in this installation, with the Woman’s Club contributing rose bushes to plant next to the Georgianna Boutwell memorial bench and the Friends of the Trees contributing several handsome trees along the driveway. The plantings were based on the landscape plans of Lorayne Black. Penny said it was a pleasure to work with the other groups and hoped that more collaborative projects would follow. The Garden Club is now working on a book to record all the plantings and to provide a guide to their care, with special attention to watering the new plants during their first year.

The balmy day was perfect for refreshments on the side porch following the meeting and a stroll through our new garden. Penny answered our questions about various plants—their upkeep, hardiness, and noninvasiveness. ■

Historic Buildings *Continued from page 6*

converting the space into any kind of housing. Concerns about the added traffic on Main Street were, perhaps, the chief reason for discounting residential conversion but there was also a desire to bring more commercial/business enterprises to the mix of residential and government buildings along Main Street.

The committee investigated a wide range of possibilities including conversion to a hotel (the building was considered too small to be a viable, profitable hotel), but no single plan achieved committee members’ unanimous support. Though not in full agreement, the committee brought forward a possible use for the building at spring 2014 town meeting, a plan which called for the building to be purchased by a local businessman who would invest considerable funds to update it and bring it up to code and in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (i.e., install an elevator) and move his own businesses into the space. While the commercial space possibility was described in detail with the buyer making a presentation at town meeting, another vision, that of a performing arts center drawing together disparate regional groups which would use the building as headquarters, and rehearsal and performance space, also received support from some committee members and town meeting voters. These two proposals divided the spring town meeting vote sufficiently that the businessman’s plan did not receive the necessary votes for approval. He agreed to try again at fall 2014 town meeting, and an article asking for approval to sell Prescott School rather than keep it in town hands was again put on the warrant.

At the fall 2014 town meeting on October 20, discussion was long and fervent on both sides. The prospect of “selling out” a piece of our historic heritage in exchange for economic gain was unsettling to many. The vote, handcounted to ensure an accurate reading of the will of the voters remaining at the meeting (fewer than 200), again failed, for lack of a 2/3rds majority.

What happens next is uncertain. At this time the futures for Prescott and Tarbell schools and the old center fire station are still works in progress. It may well be that all will be decided by year’s end or new issues will arise to put projects behind or plans will be scrapped all together. The question remains, however: are we as a town are doing all we can to preserve our architectural history in a way that carries over into the next generations? ■

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COMING UP: Tuesday January 13, 2015, at 7 pm at the Groton Public Library, a talk on Medical Practice in Early New England Small Towns, presented by Constance Putnam, Concord author and lecturer.

Groton Town Hearse Helps Littleton Celebrate 300th Year



The occasion was grand—Littleton’s Tricentennial Celebration—and the day, September 6, 2014, was perfect for a parade. Our old Town Hearse, owned by the GHS since 1936, rode in style down the entire parade route in Littleton behind two fine work horses named Bill and Cody. It was the last vehicle in the parade and carried a sign in the rear window that said, simply, “The End”—a delightful double entendre.

The inset photo shows Bruce Locke holding the reins and, beside him, waving to the crowd, is David Badger from the Badger Funeral Home. The photos were taken by David Whitcomb as the hearse passed by the Littleton Historical Society on King Street.

The old hearse is Groton’s fourth such vehicle. The

first was bought in 1803, said town historian Samuel A. Green, and was replaced in 1842, in 1870, and again in 1900. This is the hearse we have today. It cost the town \$641.70 back then and was in service until 1919 (or 1921), when it was stored in several different places until it found a more-or-less permanent home in 1965 in the “new” building behind Boutwell House. According to GHS records, it remains “in fine condition and needs only T.L.C. and dry weather conditions when used.” Fifty years ago, the old hearse appeared in Littleton’s 250th anniversary parade with William Badger (David’s father) on the bench seat. It also did itself proud in Groton’s 350th anniversary parade in 2005. ■