

Then and Now

Newsletter of the Groton Historical Society

Volume 13, Number 3

July 2012

Modern-Day Pioneers in Groton

C. David Gordon, GHS Vice President

*In the year fifty-four they left for the west
Three pioneer families so full of zest.
Excitement ran high when in Groton town
They found what they wanted and settled down.*

*This is the way Martha C. Hill, a friend of the three families from Greater Boston, began the poem she dedicated to them at a party celebrating the 25th anniversary of the year the families established their summer camp on Lowell Road. In 1991, two of the pioneers, Carolyn B. and Arnold P. G. Peterson, compiled a family memoir they called *The 'Groton' Story*, from which this article derives. This story is especially dear to me because I lived there myself, in the house the Petersons built, for a decade or so when I was married to one of the pioneer daughters, the late Susan Skinner Gordon.*

Early in 1954, three families who had known each other as members of First Parish Unitarian Church of Newton found they shared the dream of finding vacation homes in the country with a pond nearby. Arnold and Carolyn Peterson, from Weston, and John and Virginia ("Ginny") Taplin of West Newton, enlisted Joseph Skinner, also of West Newton and with a background in commercial real estate, to search for a likely site, since Joe and his wife, Jeanne, also yearned for a place in the country. Among them the three families had eleven children.

Joe located by April a tract three miles out of the town center off Lowell Road (Route 40), the land rising beyond the far side of a meadow. The convergence of two streams formed a swampy area eventually draining into Whitney Pond (also called Cow Pond). Delighted by what they saw when they inspected Joe's "find" in rural Groton, the three families purchased 102.6 acres of land on June 14 from Cal (Caroline) Roberts, who lived across the street with her husband, Rex, who a decade later would publish the book *Your Engineered House*. The land, fronting Lowell Road and Whitney Pond, extended back into the woods over glacial terrain of drumlins and eskers all the way to the edge of the Mountain Lakes development.

The families built an access road from Lowell Road and a culvert over the brook that formed a first swimming hole. Joe himself suggested a spot for a well that proved a fine source of drinking water. Their first shelter was a large screened-in structure built by Rex Roberts and called the Pavilion, an open-air affair with a large common room with fireplace and three small rooms off to the sides, one for each family. Amenities included water piped in from the well, an ice box, and a wood-burning stove. Later would come storm windows and electricity.

Cherishing privacy, each family soon created a permanent camp site on which to raise tents. Joe had envisioned a pond situated on the low land through which the combined streams ran. The families hired Winthrop (Win) Parker of Ayer to scoop away the swampy, muddy ground down to a gravel base. Piled-up mud formed the pond's extensive side banks and was fashioned into an earthen

GHS on Parade!

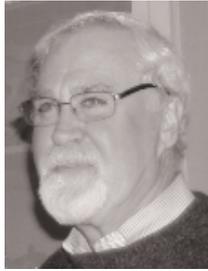


GHS board members (from left) C. David Gordon, John Ott, Michael Flynn, Peter Benedict, and Barbara Murray line up behind our proud banner bearers Owen (left) and Luke Benedict as Groton's Memorial Day Parade on May 28, 2012, gets underway. Courtesy photo.

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2 Main Street View: Thanks for Your Work

Things may look deadly quiet at 172 Main St., home of the Groton Historical Society, but trust me, it is anything but. In the last two months not only has new electrical and plumbing installation work been going on inside, but in the small office upstairs, the archival processing work of the Boutwell Family papers, made possible by a generous \$3000 grant from the B.J. Anderson Foundation, has been taking place. This may involve the first reading of some documents and uncovering of others, like original letters from Benjamin Franklin in the 1770's relating to our nation's diplomatic efforts. If this whets your appetite for more you will have to wait until volunteer Judy Adams uncovers more. But those letters are in our care under Society stewardship.



Physical restoration work at Boutwell House, while mostly related to infrastructure, has also triggered new relationships with local and state organizations as we attempt to structure our funding of the renovation project. The technical paper work related to the \$79,000 Cultural Facilities Grant awarded by the Massachusetts Cultural Council is clearing its last hurdles, and the Society's Board of Directors has approved taking out a major \$60,000 Revolving Line of Credit with an area bank to ensure the project doesn't run into fiscal issues either while waiting for reimbursement from the state or having to wait to pay vendors whose own cash needs often are keen in this difficult economy.

Yet with all this fancy fiscal work going on, the Groton Historical Society has found it possible to again award a \$500 scholarship to a Groton-Dunstable High School senior for a meaningful historical essay on our community. Ms. Audrey Bryce, who for more than 15 years has overseen and managed this program, found great pleasure in awarding our 2012 Sheedy Scholarship to Christopher Scott Hourani, a very able student hoping to attend George Washington University.

But whatever work is undertaken by the Society it is only possible because you our members have renewed, upgraded or converted your membership, providing the operating funds we need to carry on our work. We are a volunteer organization made up of many committed and invested friends of the Society. We hold our collections in trust for the Town of Groton; the volunteers who make calls, write letters, process collections, run programs, and support town events are you and others like you. I can only admire and say thank you for your work. Groton is lucky to have the GHS and we are lucky to have YOU. Have a pleasant summer.

John H. Ott
President, GHS
July 2012

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Boutwell House is temporarily closed for renovations and will reopen in early fall 2012. Please call or contact us by email with any questions. Check our website often for program details and other news.

TO REACH US:

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From the Editor

We'd love to hear from you. This is your newsletter -- we hope you find it interesting. And I have a question for you: would you like to receive the GHS newsletter by email only, by snail mail only, or both ways? Please send me your comments and suggestions.

Barbara Murray
murraybar315@verizon.net

Issue sponsored by Kris Kramer, Realtor, EXIT Assurance Realty 978.807.7317
161 Main Street, Groton, MA 01450 www.EXITAssurance.com

Bobbie Spiegelman, GHS Curator

As the Boutwell House renovations proceed, we continue to highlight aspects of our collection through a series of exhibits created for our display case on permanent loan at the Groton Public Library (See Call for Memorabilia on page 4). The current exhibit, on display through the end of August, grew out of a bird walk organized last May by the Nashua River Watershed Association. The idea of partnering with other organizations in town, such as the NRWA and the GPL, is appealing as it broadens the audiences for all of our events and opens up interesting and more innovative ways of interpreting our town's history.

Other programs around birds quickly emerged. The NRWA scheduled a bird walk for early June led by Mark Archambault, and before that, hosted a bird talk on May 6 at their Resource Center.

Ornithologist Clayton Hobart showed slides and discussed recent changes in the bird population around Groton and Ayer, comparing statistics from the MassAudubon report, *The State of the Birds in 2011*, with notes from a field guide published in 1995 by the late, beloved Bertrand B. Hopkins, called *Birds of Groton & Ayer*. The Society's contribution to the budding partnership of local cultural organizations was to set up an exhibit at



Bert Hopkins's book Birds of Groton & Ayer is the nucleus of the birding display at the library, which will run through the end of August. Stuffed birds in the case and in the wall niches (Northern Goshawk is shown) are on loan from the Shattuck Collection at the Lawrence Library in Pepperell. Photos by Barbara Murray.

the library related to birding. The Society already owned a pamphlet on bird banding by William Wharton (see Did You Know . . . on page 4), but this was not enough to build a display on, so the quest was on to reach out to

others in town to fill in the gaps.

Since Clay Hobart's talk centered on Bert Hopkins, we saw this as a logical place to begin. Conversations with Betsy Hopkins, Bert's widow, not only garnered us a copy of Bert's 1995 book that we didn't previously own, these also provided opportunities to learn so much more about our hometown birder and his links to prominent birders in our area both past and present.

Increased interest in Bert's birding activities led us to Jerry Wooding, another of our local bird experts, who owned a rare copy of a 1947 pamphlet by Austen Fox Riggs II called *Notes on the Birds of Groton* that he graciously donated to the Society. It joins Bert's field guide and William Wharton's pamphlet on bird banding in the display case, along with Bert's field binoculars and five small stuffed native birds—a black-throated Blue Warbler, a Northern Parula, a Northern (Baltimore)

Oriole, a Black and White Warbler, and a Whip-Poor-Will—on loan from the Sidney Moore Shattuck Collection at the Lawrence Library in Pepperell. There is also one small wood model of a Bobwhite, a favorite of Betsy Hopkins, carved by Bert's brother, Edward, and painted by Edward's wife, Julia. Rounding out the exhibit, which nearly fills the Main Street entry hall of the library, are several photographs, two beautiful oversize illustrated books of birds from the GPL's holdings, other bird books, and two large mounted specimens in the niches above the display case—one a Northern Goshawk and the other an American (Common) Merganser—also from the Shattuck Collection.

This process of exploring new programming ideas around our collection led us to individuals who renewed their connections to the Society. We hope this approach might also help generate interest in our community with those who may now become Groton history enthusiasts. The Society's collection is filled with interesting, eclectic and significant items which, when put together, always tell an illuminating story. ■

4 *Did You Know.....*

... that one of Groton's most distinguished citizens, William P. Wharton, maintained a bird-banding station at his farm on Broadmeadow Road for 50 years? That between 1922 and 1950, he banded 38,057 birds? Wharton was one of the first private citizens to ever be awarded a Federal bird-banding permit. The birds were gently captured in mist nets, then banded and released after he noted in a record book such data as weight, approximate age, etc. Only a small percentage of birds were recovered, but data were recorded on those birds as well, especially the date and place of recovery. Two examples Wharton cited were a White Crowned Sparrow, banded in Groton on 10/12/39 and found dead on 1/28/40 at Mt. Home, TX, and a Black-throated Green Warbler banded in Groton on 5/24/33 and "caught" in W. Memphis, TN, on 10/22/33. Many recovered birds had been shot.

The Groton Historical Society is in possession of a binder containing some of Mr. Wharton's bird-banding records.
--E.S.

CALL FOR MEMORABILIA FOR UPCOMING LIBRARY DISPLAYS

September 4--November 16: Political Campaign Memorabilia from Past Elections

DO YOU HAVE old campaign buttons or posters or any other artifacts from past elections? Will you lend them to GHS for this display? Email us at info@grotonhistoricalsociety.org or call 978-448-0092.

November 16--January 7, 2013: A Display of Christmas Past in Groton

DO YOU HAVE old Christmas in Groton photos or other seasonal memorabilia? Will you lend them to GHS for this display? Email us at info@grotonhistoricalsociety.org or call 978-448-0092.

Pioneers continued from page 1

dam at the end closest to Whitney Pond--an undertaking that would surely not meet wetlands regulations today but was highly successful then. Loads of sand brought in formed a suitable beach for this new swimming and boating area. They called the pond Skitapet, a name fashioned from the opening letters of the families' last names—Skinner, Taplin, and Peterson.

Living Close to Nature

By 1960 each family had built their own vacation home, sturdy enough to live in year-round. They divided the land so that each had a 30-acre section and shared in common a fourth tract next to Lowell Road including the meadow.

The Skinners, first to build, chose the hill overlooking both Whitney and Skitapet ponds. They expanded the house as occasion arose, adding also a substantial barn, chicken house, and other outbuildings and carving out a lower pasture for cattle and horses and an upper pasture for sheep. The Taplins constructed a house perched atop a hog-back directly off Lowell Road, from which they could also

look down on both ponds. Below the house, on the Skitapet shore, they added a tennis court and bath house. John's business in the Boston area meant that their enjoyment of this spot was mostly on the weekends. The Petersons had a house constructed on a rise above the far shore of Skitapet, in between the Skinner house and the Taplin house (see drawing on page 5).

In 1975 the Skinners sold their home in West Newton and the Petersons their place in Weston and the two families moved fulltime to Groton. Carolyn worked in the Children's Room at Groton Public Library. Joe over time contributed much to Groton zoning and planning, its drinking water resources, and the workings of the Groton Conservation Trust.

In May 1971 Ginny Taplin organized the first "Groton Bird-In" and, except for the year 1980, this was an annual event for family and invited guests each May until 1983. That first year, according to the report, the group sighted 46 varieties of birds. The three families also

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identified and listed 86 varieties of wildflowers, 37 types of trees and shrubs, and 6 types of ferns.

Changes in the Offing

But people got older, moved away, died. In December 1979 the Petersons moved to Bainbridge Island in Washington State. Susan Skinner and her son, Bela, moved into the former Peterson house, where I joined them in 1984.

In 1983 Jeanne and Joe Skinner moved to a new home in the former upper pasture and sold their house on the hill below.

Meanwhile, in 1982 they had purchased a small house on Station Avenue in Groton Center that they had remodeled for use as a winter home. Troubled by suddenly appearing and fast-moving cancer, Joe died there in December 1985, an event the Petersons spoke of as “the saddest change in the community.” In 1987 Jeanne sold the house in the upper pasture.

As traveling back and forth between West Newton and Groton became more difficult, the Taplins sold their house on Lowell Road in 1994. Finally, with the sale of the former Peterson (now Gordon) house in January 1998, 44 years after the summer adventure began, the last connection with the founding families was severed.

Cherished Memories

What was it like to live in the woods in Groton in the 50s and 60s and 70s and 80s? The Petersons recorded many happy memories in their memoir. Jeanne Skinner loved “sharing and observing the richness of our land with our naturalist, Alan [Peterson].” Helen Taplin remembered “going barefoot all the time no matter what the terrain.” Rick Skinner spoke of the “mysterious places in the woods” he liked to explore. His twin sister Susan remembered “driving the old faded Chevy step-side pickup truck through the woods with Rick.” Janet Peterson wrote, “I remember how days had no beginning and no end. There

was a feeling of endless hours to spend daydreaming, pretending, and working.”

In concluding the memoir, the Petersons said, “Some things haven’t changed. Lady slippers still grow in the woods in the spring. Cardinal flowers bloom in the brook by the culvert. Blueberries, high and low bush, can be picked in the summer, Fish swim in the pond. Turtles sun themselves on the logs. Skinny dipping is possible for those who choose. We remember the wonderful times we spent around the pond, in the woods, by a camp fire, on the

beach, at the pavilion, or on the meadow with our life-long friends.”



The Peterson house evolved from a rough-finished camp to a year-round modern residence but never lost its “little house in the woods” look or feel.

Lasting Legacy

The original 17 pioneers have moved on, but they left a permanent legacy to the people of Groton, thanks to generous gifts of conservation land from both the Taplins and the Skinners, more than 250 acres in all. Over the years both John Taplin and Joe Skinner purchased land

beyond the original 102 acres and have donated it, in several parcels, to the Groton Conservation Trust. Joe and Jeanne Skinner donated 51 acres they called Skitapet Conservation Land as a tribute to the three pioneer families. After Joe died in 1985, John and Ginny Taplin donated 128 acres of woodlands to be known as Skinner Forest in Joe’s memory. The Taplins also contributed land to the Lost Lake Recreation Area, the Duck Pond Conservation Area, and the Whitney Well Site (under the jurisdiction of the Groton Water Commission), and established the Taplin Wildlife Sanctuary at the edge of Whitney Pond where it meets Lowell Road.

The love of the land that brought the Skitapet pioneers to Groton in 1954 lives on through their generosity to the people of Groton, enabling others to get close to nature the way they and their families did fifty years ago. ■



Repairing Boutwell House

Step 4: Wiring, Heating, Sprinklers, and Stoves

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

Since last report, we have been working on items that are essential to the overall project but some of which will never be seen by visitors. Having been in the construction industry for most of my life, I know how proud contractors are of their work that is hidden behind plaster walls and ceilings, done many times in a very artistic manner that no one will ever see.

Wonders Behinds the Walls

Electricity is a critical component of every house so our electrician, Randy O'Grady of Groton, and I have been scouting the present electrical system for any component that is need of repair. We've created a list of all electrical needs in order of priority so that the most critical needs are met first, convenience needs are met second, and the wish list is addressed last based on the dollars available. With all house utilities hidden behind walls and above ceilings, you don't know what you don't know until you start working, and very often one item replaced leads to another unanticipated item to be replaced. As careful as we were in putting together the initial CPA Electrical budget, once we started work, many new items have been found that needed to be replaced.

Much of the house had been rewired maybe 50 to 70 years ago and in more recent years some upgrades had been done here and there. At this point much of this older wiring has either been repaired or replaced by Randy in an effort to make sure the new system lasts another 50 to 75 years. Most people don't realize that mice, chipmunks and squirrels love some of the fabric and plastic coatings used on electrical wires, chewing on the wire insulation until they get a slight shock. Once in a while the power of the electricity claims the life of a little critter when they bite through the insulation into the copper wires. Hopefully in our effort to seal up the foundation through the CPA grant foundation repointing

work, we have minimized any future destruction by our critter friends.

Converting to Gas Heat

Heating system specialists have been touring the house in an attempt to recommend the most efficient heating system for the house. It appears we will be using a small 95% efficient gas-fired hot water boiler with a very efficient SuperStor domestic hot water tank for the apartment. This system will be put on a separate gas meter so that, in the future, our tenant can pay for his or her own heat and hot water.

The main house will have a large 95% efficient gas-fired hot water boiler with three separate house heating zones installed. One zone will be for the first-floor main house including the kitchen area, one zone for the second-floor main house and one zone just for the second-floor office space. The thought is that the museum part of the house can be kept at 50 degrees in the winter with the office area being a comfortable 70 degrees or so when in use.

All of the thermostats will be replaced with digital thermostats that can be programed for time of use which will help tremendously in fuel economies. Since the main house will not be using very much domestic hot water, the hot water for the two bathroom hand sinks and the new kitchen soapstone sink will be supplied by a small electric hot water heater.



The Boutwell House kitchen will soon be graced by this reconditioned Hub wood-burning cook stove, described by its manufacturer Smith & Anthony Co. of Boston as "a range that permits more work to be done at one time than any other range made."

Photo by Barbara Murray.

Fire Sprinklers Next on List

Our fire suppression system has been thoroughly engineered, and the plans have been submitted to the Groton Fire Department for review. Our Engineer and Groton Firefighter/EMT Tyler Shute went back and forth over the best system design and in the end have come to an agreement for the best solution to address fire suppression needs throughout the entire Boutwell House. Fire Sprinkler Systems of Richmond, NH, has been selected

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to install the system, and they are patiently awaiting the Cultural Facilities Grant money to be certified so they can start work. Material costs have gone up almost 10% since they gave us the original quote but they have graciously agreed not to raise the price to us based on the original work quoted. Knowing that funding is very close to being certified, they have ordered all of the system materials in anticipation of starting very soon. [See *Main Street View on page 2 for an update on the status of this funding.*]

Donations Still Sought for Hub Stove

Halsey Platt of Groton has been contacted to build a kitchen sink base cabinet that is both functional and of period design. Dave Erickson of Littleton, who supplied our “new” kitchen soapstone sink and has vast knowledge of historic house components, has volunteered to assist in the design of the cabinet.



Small print in this old advertisement lists several advantages “found only in the HUB Range which makes Cooking a Pleasure.” Photo by Al Collins.

Mr. Erickson has also delivered our new Hub wood-burning kitchen cook stove, which is thought to be of the same design as one in the house back at the turn of the century (see photos). The Hub Cook Stove has been completely refurbished to the point that it is as good as new both in functionality and in looks . . . it is beautiful. The Historical Society has received over \$1500 in donations so far, a third of the way toward paying for this glorious stove. If you want to be a contributor in bringing history alive, please donate any amount you can to help out by sending a check made out to the Groton Historical Society (with HUB model woodstove on the memo line) to GHS, POB 202, Groton, MA 01450. We thank you. ■

GHS MEMBERSHIP FORM

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

Name(s): _____

Mailing Address: _____

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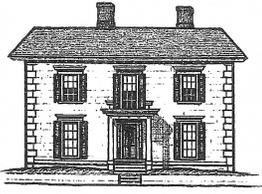
Groton Historical Society
 PO Box 202
 Groton, MA 01450

**-- 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.

Use the Membership Form on this page.

All new members--and their recruiting Champions—will be recognized in the celebratory October issue of *Then and Now*.



Groton Historical Society

172 Main Street, P.O. Box 202

Groton, MA 01450

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Then and Now

July 2012

Volume 13, Number 3

Upcoming Programs

Sunday October 14: Exploring the Groton Soapstone Quarry

2:00 PM • In the woods off Common Street, near the Rail Trail

Free and open to the public thanks to a grant from the Groton Commissioners of Trust Funds.

October is Archaeology Month in Massachusetts. Archaeologist Marty Dudek will take us on a walking tour around Groton's own soapstone quarry, located on GCT's Shepley Hill conservation land. The quarry was actively mined from 1828 to 1868. We will see various features of the quarry site and former mill buildings as well as examples of some of the products made at the mill. Wear sturdy shoes. The quarry is a quarter of a mile walk through the woods from Common Street.

Later in the Fall (dates to be announced): Harvest Celebration

Regional Celebration of the Harvest, Our Farmers, and Our Local Agricultural Heritage – sponsored by Freedom's Way with participation of nearby towns in the Freedom's Way National Heritage Area.

See www.grotonhistoricalsociety.org for more details