

Then and Now

Newsletter of the Groton Historical Society

Volume 14, Number 1

January 2013

Walking Through History: Groton's Soapstone Quarry

C. David Gordon, GHS Board Member

A record number of almost 80 devotees of local history followed Archaeologist Marty Dudek along a quarter-mile path the afternoon of October 14, 2012, to view the site of Groton's old soapstone quarry and mining industry and hear what he had unearthed about its story (see photo).

This "walk through history" was Groton Historical Society's annual celebration of Archaeology Month. Dudek of Pepperell, who led the Society's tour of the Nate Nutting mill site off Indian Hill Road a year ago October to much acclaim, is the senior project manager and principal archaeologist at John Milner Associates, historic preservation and cultural resources management firm based in West Chester, PA. "It's pretty exciting to have a soapstone quarry right here in Groton," he said, since this stone is "not common." He conveyed a sense of excitement to his listeners as he had them pause at three different spots beside the now water-filled quarry, then talked about what might once have gone on in these quiet woods (see *Digging Further into the Past*, page 7).

Soapstone is a metamorphic rock, metamorphosis being a change in something's basic nature or structure, in this case

mineral deposits or sediments are changed by pressure, heat, and water from their original consistency, made more compact or more highly crystalline.

These particular deposits, heavily laced with talc,

along with other minerals, become a rock that is softer than slate or mica. Soapstone got its name from having a soapy feel to it when you move your hand along its surface.

The soapstone formation in Groton has a brown color while in other formations it could have a gray-green color. Dudek said the rock here was prized because it was stronger than that found at many other locations.

People have made use of soapstone from ancient times, at first fashioning implements for food preparation and personal adornment. More than 3000 years ago, according to Dudek, Native Americans made bowls of soapstone. At a soapstone quarry in Johnston, Rhode Island, he saw how they had fashioned these bowls out of rock as he found many bowls there in various stages of being made. He said there was no sign of such work by Native Americans found at this Groton formation, but we do know that they lived in the vicinity.

Evidence of Factory Site

Dudek stood next to the quarry itself and had his audience look in the direction he thinks the most significant factory building had once been located. The unknown photographer responsible for an 1860's era photo of that building, the third on that site, must have stood just where Dudek himself stood (see photo on page 6). The large wood building, completed in 1865 for the stock company Groton

Soapstone Company and operated by three brothers -- Daniel, David, and William McCaine -- had an attached building housing the steam-engine power source. Six gang saws powered by



Attentive crowd gathered around tour guide Marty Dudek as he conjured up quarrying operations of 150 years ago. Photo by Barbara Murray.

the engine could cut six soapstone slabs at the same time from a block that had been dug out from the quarry. With

Continued on page 6

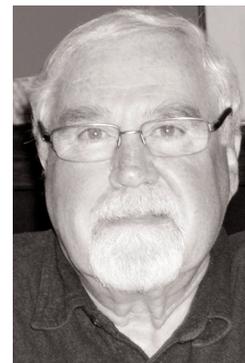
Main Street View: Thankful for a Bright and Busy Year

As we move forward into the year 2013 we are most thankful for all we accomplished during 2012, even without having access to the Boutwell House as it undergoes renovation. Many individuals and organizations have lent a hand to keep us on course and before the public eye. The Boutwell House through the generous support of both the Town of Groton's CPA grant and the State of Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund grant is seeing improvements to its infrastructure daily. All this has been under the watchful care of Al Collins our talented project manager and his coterie of hard working contractors who have done an amazing job under less than ideal winter conditions, the most difficult being the lack of heat inside the building. But there have been no complaints--not from plumbers, electricians, carpenters, fire suppression specialists or Al. They just keep plugging ahead, knowing that in the end we will have a building that is safe, accessible, worthy of public patronage, and that they had a hand in our success.



Then there are our dedicated board members who continue to work on planning for the future--growing our collections, presenting interesting public programs and topical exhibits, and extending our public outreach by building up our membership. Our newsletter is now a joy to read and full of information and stories about our town. There was a well-attended lecture on the Shattuck family earlier this month, and visits from families with long ties to Groton like the Farnsworths and Tarbells have kept others busy doing local research and gathering materials for our ongoing exhibits at the Groton Public Library. The Society's active presence and booth at Grotonfest in September allowed us to recruit new members and to sell a variety of valuable publications on town history to those eager to learn more about our community's past.

The GHS participated in the Memorial Day Parade last May with flags and banner in hand and held two very successful outdoor programs organized by Tom Callahan, a walking tour of the Groton Soapstone Quarry in October and a bus tour in July of the forest and environmental lands given, protected or promoted by Groton's somewhat elusive



William Wharton. Both programs ran at capacity with the help of authorities on the subjects like Marty Dudek, Marion Stoddart, and Roy Johnson. And at the end of December our first Teddy Bear Tea, held at the Grange Hall, attracted families with both grandparents and small children whose joy was shared by everyone. Many thanks go to Linda Andelman and Anna Eliot for planning and organizing this fine event—a true collaboration between the Historical Society and students from the high school Drama Guild, the Groton Garden Club, Scott Wilson Design, local author Peter Macy, Bonnie Biocchi and several other individuals and businesses who contributed in a variety of ways. Last but not least, we thank the Groton Grange, which offered us the use of its refurbished hall.

The past year was more than bright and certainly busy, thanks to you our supporting members, volunteers and contributors. So as we begin 2013, I see an exciting future when even more will be accomplished, through new public programs, thoughtful new on-site exhibitions, and cultivation events celebrating the reopening of our renovated museum property in late summer. I hope you will remain a part of this bright future by renewing your membership when it comes due and by helping us to attract new members to share in the richness of our Town's past and its people.

Again, thank you for both your support and involvement. On behalf of the Board of Directors, I extend our very best wishes for the New Year.

*John H. Ott
President, GHS
January 2013*

**Issue sponsored by Kris Kramer, Realtor, EXIT Assurance Realty 978.807.7317
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Society Reviews Year, Votes Bylaws and Board

Liz Strachan, GHS Clerk

A pleasant, upbeat evening was experienced by all who attended the Groton Historical Society's Annual Meeting at the Legion Hall on October 30, 2012. While this ritual has been repeated for over a hundred years, this was likely the first time a report was made about extensive renovations to the Boutwell House. Also on the agenda: approving newly revised Bylaws, voting for officers and board members, and viewing a slideshow highlighting the house renovations.

Looking Back on Fiscal Year 2012

President John Ott gave a "year in review" report reflecting the many activities, programs, and exhibits the Society has engaged in this year despite the fact that the Boutwell House has been closed to the public for many months. John noted specifically the growing attendance at our popular programs, the displays in our exhibit case at the Groton Public Library, our quarterly newsletter, our collaboration with other town organizations such as the Historical Commission, and the successful interactive Grotonfest exhibit in September where Bonnie Carter's spinning and Peter Benedict's timber framing demonstrations were hugely popular. During the year, the Society has also facilitated the work of several people doing historical research, and we continue to award scholarships to worthy high school students.

The Boutwell House renovations are ongoing. Two substantial grants, the CPA Grant awarded by the Town of Groton and the Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Grant, together make this project possible. However, many people don't realize that we must raise \$60,000 in matching funds in order to receive all the money from the state grant.

Groundwork has begun for a capital campaign to raise the funds for this, to grow our Endowment Fund, and to be able to realize the mission and goals that have been laid out in the Society's Long-Range Strategic Plan approved by

the membership at the 2011 Annual Meeting. Other avenues of funding are also being pursued through our Annual Appeal and sales of upcoming publications. Looking to the future, John told us, we hope to expand collaboration with our schools and also to capture Groton's more recent history by gathering oral histories from Groton's older citizens. "There are many reasons to support the Society," he said.

Our treasurer, Mike Flynn, reported a healthy balance in our bank account, but noted that this is in no small part due to not having a paid employee currently. The Endowment Fund is holding its own, but will need to grow in order to properly carry out our mission. Our "bottom line" is also supported by a growing number of paid-up members—145 at last count. Our approximately 44 Life Members have been given the opportunity to make a yearly donation to help defray the rising costs of providing member benefits and many of them have. The Treasurer's Report was approved unanimously.

Society Bylaws Brought up to Date

Liz Strachan reported on the work of the new Governance Committee, which has revised the Society's bylaws to have them better reflect how we are currently operating. Above all, she said, the Society is striving to be more outward oriented and to make the treasures it holds in trust and the history of Groton more available to the citizens of Groton and beyond. Liz also presented the slate of nominees for Officers and Directors for 2013. Two officer slots (Vice President and Assistant Treasurer) and two standing committee positions (Education and Membership) are unfilled at this time. Volunteers, please step forward. Liz welcomed Patti Modzelewski (nominated for Director at Large) and

thanked David Gordon who served as Vice President for many years and has been nominated to chair the new Publications Committee. The revised bylaws and the slate of nominees were both approved unanimously by those present and voting.



GHS Board of Directors 2012-2013: (from left, standing) Peter Benedict, Patti Modzelewski, Mike Roberts, Mike Flynn, John Ott, Bonnie Carter, Anna Eliot, David Gordon, Kris Kramer; (seated) Barbara Murray, Bobbie Spiegelman, Liz Strachan. Missing from photo: Tom Callahan and Lili Ott.

Continued on page 5

Boutwell House Project Back on Track

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

After months of waiting for our grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund (a program of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in collaboration with MassDevelopment and the Massachusetts Cultural Council) to be administered, we are back on track with the installation of a new gas-fired heating system and a fire suppression system at the Governor Boutwell House. Until we actually gained access to the funds, completion of these project items was held up due to the construction process. I like to think of construction as a form of manufacturing even though it is not done within a manufacturing facility. As in manufacturing, there is a specific order that must be followed to ensure that the finished product comes together properly. Because of this specific order, work on some items covered by the earlier CPA grant from the Town of Groton had to be put on hold until we completed installation of the heating system and fire suppression system, both funded by the Cultural Facilities grant.

From Coal to Oil to Gas

Winter is upon us and a good heating system is essential for every New England home. The Boutwell House heating system has evolved over the years since 1851, with the first heating system most likely being a coal-fired convection hot-air system. The remains of what I believe to be this coal-fired furnace are still in the basement larger than life. As time progressed, I think the system was converted to a coal-fired steam radiator system and eventually to a more modern, oil-fired hot-water radiator system that has been keeping the house (and the apartment) warm up to the present. Within the past ten years the oil-fired boiler was replaced with a

larger-than-needed oil-fired boiler that could accommodate future expansion of the house. Unfortunately, this larger-than-needed boiler also consumed a larger-than-needed amount of oil so the Cultural Facilities grant money is paying for a conversion to a new gas-fired heating system.

The PK McGuane Plumbing and Heating Company of Ayer was awarded this part of the project based on system design and overall cost. They have installed highly efficient gas-fired Lochinvar boilers, a large one to provide multiple heating zones for the main house and a smaller one to provide heat to the apartment. We've also added a dedicated heating zone for the new office area on the second floor, which will allow Boutwell House volunteers and future administrative help to crank up the heat in the office space without raising the heat in the remainder of the house. With the apartment heat separated from the main house boiler, future tenants will be able to control and pay for their own heat, which will help in reducing and controlling the ongoing heating budget for the main part of the house. As of this date, the apartment heating system is up and running but the main house system is waiting for National Grid to upgrade the gas service in the basement to a large enough service to power the main house boiler.

Protection from Fire High Priority

Fire suppression is another essential component we are adding to the house through the Cultural Facilities grant. Protecting a major piece of Groton's historical legacy can

only be done if the right tools, one of which is fire suppression, are used to do just that. Fire is one of the biggest threats to an older home, as we found out with the loss of the Groton Inn in August 2011, because of the construction methods used to create these structures. Boutwell House has what are called balloon-framed walls,



Installation of a water line for the new fire suppression system in Boutwell House began with jack hammering the street pavement. Photo by Al Collins.

Continued on page 5

Boutwell House Continued from page 4

where the wood studs typically run from the first floor sill up to the roof rafters, allowing the possibility for fire to travel from the basement to the attic within the outer walls before being detected. A properly designed fire suppression system will help to suppress a fire in any area of the house before it has a chance to get out of control.

Fire Sprinkler Services Inc. of Richmond, NH, was awarded the contract for the fire suppression system due to experience in working in museum structures, their design creativity and the cost for the system installation. Sprinkler piping is now complete in the main house, with work within the apartment and basement to be completed soon. We have tried to hide as much of the system piping as possible in closets and in areas where pipes might be less conspicuous. The only public area where the piping could not be concealed is in the main front hall. To do such would have required opening up plastered walls, but not only was that not in the budget, it would have impacted the historic value of the house. All of the main exhibit rooms have only a few

sprinkler heads protruding from walls and most people may not even notice them. Every part of the attic and basement has been covered, with sprinkler heads located where accidental breakage of the heads is unlikely. In the end, all of the exposed sprinkler pipes can be painted in the same manner as the existing exposed radiator heating pipes, minimizing their visual impact.

Bringing Water to the Sprinklers

Fire suppression systems are wonderful in protecting structures but cannot operate without the proper volume and pressure of water needed to suppress flames. The Boutwell House system is no exception, so some of the Cultural Facilities grant paid for a new 4-inch water main to tie in the house to the town water line that runs down Main Street. Our special thanks are given to the Groton Water Department and the Groton Fire Department for working with us to minimize the expense of the costly installation and testing of this water main. Robert C. Black Co. Inc. of Groton was awarded the excavation contract working in conjunction with Town officials to install the new service into the basement of the house (see photo on page 4). Fire Sprinkler Services Inc. will design and install a water manifold in the basement connecting all of the sprinkler risers to this new service, meeting the demands of sprinkler heads. Outside the house on the apartment side, you will notice a red official-looking standpipe, which is the water shut-off valve the Fire Department uses should there be need to extinguish a fire in the house (see photo at left).

All in all we are in good shape to move forward through the winter with the rest of the interior renovation work so that by springtime the house can be reoccupied and we can focus on the remaining funded exterior work. ■



Both standpipe and heating system vent on the east side of Boutwell House will soon be screened by new landscaping. Photo by Al Collins.

Year in Review Continued from page 3

Returning as GHS officers are John Ott, President; Liz Strachan, Clerk; and Michael Flynn, Treasurer. Directors are Peter Benedict, Tom Callahan, Bonnie Carter, Anna Eliot, C. David Gordon, Kristin Kramer, Patti Modzelewski, Barbara Murray, Michael Roberts, Lili Ott, and Bobbie Spiegelman (see photo on page 3).

The revised bylaws and the names of all Directors and Officers are posted on the Society's website, www.grotonhistoricalsociety.org – click on Visit, then Board and Bylaws. A full list of board members and their committee assignments appears on page 7.

Renovation Highlights

Annual Meeting business was followed by pleasure. Al Collins, Clerk of Works for the Boutwell House Rehabilitation Project, presented a slideshow and talk

about the ongoing work. Most of the work so far has been to install new heating, plumbing, and electrical infrastructure, Al said. In addition, a new fire suppression system is being installed, and the side porch is being brought back to its original look. The kitchen may well turn out to be the gem of the house, Al said, when the beautiful period cookstove and soapstone sink are put in place and the smell of cooking food wafts through the house. Insulating, plastering, and painting are yet to be done, but it was exciting to see the progress to date and to contemplate the time when the work will be completed and we can share it all with members and other townspeople. Following Al's excellent presentation, one attendee was heard to comment, "I never thought I would actually enjoy seeing photos of pipes and wires, but I did!" ■

Soapstone Quarry *Continued from page 1*

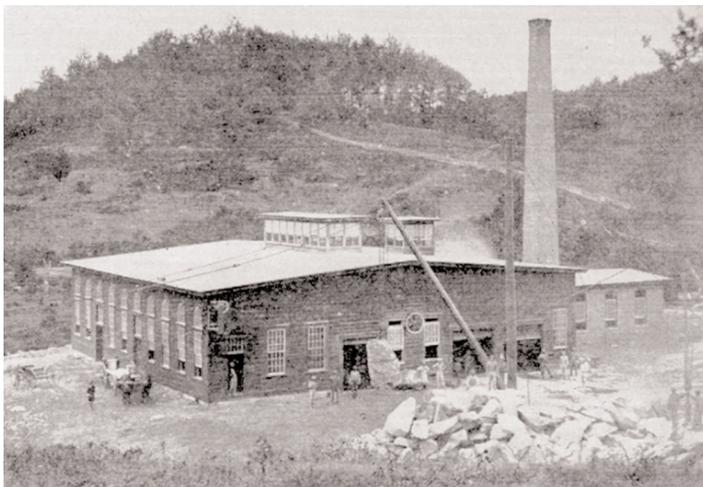
a factory touted as “the best-equipped and largest of its kind in the country,” as Dr. Samuel A. Green stated in his 1887 *History of the Town of Groton*, the company’s soapstone was being shipped as far away as China. It was valued by this time for its heat resistance, making it perfect for hearthstones, sinks, removable hotplates for stove tops, bed-warmers, ink wells, and in pumps.

In the foreground of the old photo is a loose pile of huge stone fragments, much larger than the modest pile still remaining. Pointing to the pile, Dudek called our attention to several foundation blocks for the factory building. Some still held metal staples to which building walls could have been attached. But no perfect rectangle of stones has been found, suggesting, he said, that some rocks had been taken away for use elsewhere or had become buried in the ground. Some of the boulders scattered about here may have been used to anchor and support the derrick, and others merely piled up to get them out of the way. Bricks in the pile may have come from the smokestack.

Water had to be pumped out of the quarry to allow for continuous removal of blocks to be dressed and honed in the factory. A soapstone plunger forced water up into wood pipes to carry water out of the quarry itself. Dudek told us he could find no evidence that blasting had occurred to break off separate blocks, but if that had been done blasting powder would have been used since dynamite had not yet been invented.

Early Signs of Quarrying

Our tour brought us to two depressions in the earth probably marking the cellar holes of earlier quarry buildings. First to build a working mill on the property had been John Fitch, who discovered a soapstone ledge back in 1828



Old photo of third and last factory on the site shows a tall square smokestack beside the building and, in front, a pile of stone fragments and the derrick used to hoist blocks up to ten tons in weight from the quarry. Source of photo not known.

when his ax got stuck in the soft stone while he was cutting down trees. For years Fitch sawed stone by hand and began milling it at a shop adjoining a neighbor’s house and then at workshop located near his home. Later he built a steam mill near the quarry. He employed two hired hands to help him. In 1835 the Needham family on land to the south of the quarry tried without success to find soapstone on their land.

In 1855 Fitch’s heirs sold the quarry to Samuel Adams of Townsend and Daniel McCaine of Groton. Adams managed the quarry until his death in 1858, and by 1861 his heirs sold the property to the three McCaine brothers, David and William having earlier moved to town to join Daniel in the venture. The trio then took charge, Daniel becoming quarry superintendent.

In 1859 and again in 1864 fire destroyed the mill building, but each time it was rebuilt, the third building being financed by the new owner, the Groton Soapstone Company. Two scant years into operation, the Groton Soapstone Co. signaled it was having financial difficulties, and the mine and plant were shut down in 1868. That was the end of soapstone quarrying in Groton. The business failed, Dudek thought, because of “a decreasing supply of stone coming out of the quarry here.” The plant may not have been able to keep up with demand; also the uses for soapstone were shifting. Stone and wood materials used to construct the factory were probably taken away and used for other projects.

The small path used to give the tour group access to the quarry, Dudek indicated, had been a much wider and smoother tote road used to take milled stones out to Common Street and to market. Perhaps most blocks were carted further down Common Street to be placed on trains of the Worcester & Nashua Railroad. There is no evidence, Dudek said, that quarrymen cut a more-direct road from the factory to the railroad tracks, even though they ran nearby. That area is now part of the Nashua River Rail Trail, opened in 2002.

Today soapstone is quarried primarily in Brazil, Finland, China, and India, though some is still quarried in New England and elsewhere in the US. For some time soapstone enjoyed commercial use as an electrical insulator due to its resistance to heat, electricity, and acids. This also made it useful as lab countertops, electrical switchboards, and in ceramics. Today there appears to be a resurgence of interest in the use of soapstone for kitchen sinks and countertops, as well as for works of art.

Dudek drew his walk into history to a close by noting that this quarry is “an industrial site reclaimed by Nature. Not a whole lot of evidence remains that is obvious.” He might have been quoting from Groton’s most

Continued on page 7

Soapstone Quarry Continued from page 6

recent commemorative history book, *Groton at 350: The History of a Massachusetts Town, 1655—2005*, which, on page 68, offers this view of the soapstone quarry on Shepley Hill: “Though it is a relic of the industrial age, the quarry still makes a contribution to the residents of Groton by being a beautiful place in a peaceful setting accessible with little effort all year round.” ■

Digging Further into The Past

After our tour of the soapstone quarry we saw some examples of soapstone products as we enjoyed refreshments at the home of Norma and Everett Garvin at the other end of Common Street. Not a few of us wondered, though, what the process of milling this stone was like. How many were employed here? Who were they? Where did they live and how did they fit into the town? Did these workers contract lung diseases and suffer from other illnesses or types of industrial accidents that stonecutters and quarrymen working with other types of stone encountered?

area just another place to walk through close to Nature? It could provide us with much more than that – a function hinted at in the name given to this GHS outdoor program: A Walk Through History. Archaeologist and GHS board member Michael Roberts has said he could envision key spots at this old factory site cleared of their covering of vegetation and supplied with signs placed at significant points to tell the story of the old quarry and its people for those who walk past. Interpretive signage, Roberts calls it.

His vision extends further to hope this site might in time become one of others in town to serve as the focus of some university study team’s efforts to literally dig into what took place over the centuries at these sites. Another promising site to explore is the overgrown area on GHS property at the back of Boutwell House, where there is evidence of three wells, a windmill, and a barn that burned in 1876. Local people – young and old – would have the opportunity to work with professionals on supervised “digs” to help unlock the past. They would see at first hand what the community’s shared heritage of history involves and be ready to help pass on this new knowledge of “where we’ve been” to others.

–C.D.G.



Much history is hidden in this flooded quarry reclaimed by nature. Photo by C. David Gordon.

Is this old soapstone quarry to be considered nothing more today than a brief but interesting footnote along the path of the region’s encounter with the Industrial Age? Will the townspeople consider this section of the Groton Conservation Trust’s Shepley Hill Conservation Land

GHS DIRECTORS 2012-2013

John H. Ott, President
Michael F. Flynn, Treasurer
Elizabeth Strachan, Clerk,
also Nominating / Governance

Tom Callahan, Programs
Anna Eliot, Development
C. David Gordon, Publications
Kristin S. Kramer, Buildings & Grounds
Lili Ott, Hospitality
Bobbie Spiegelman, Curator/Collections

Peter Benedict, At Large / Security
Bonnie Carter, At Large / Publicity
Patti Modzelewski, At Large
Barbara Murray, At Large / Newsletter
Michael Roberts, At Large / LR Planning

Advisors to the Board

Alvin Collins, CPA Project Manager
Valerie Jenkins, Finance
Ed Strachan, Investments Advisor
Ray Lyons, Legal Counsel

Boutwell House is temporarily closed for renovations. Please call or contact us by email with any questions.

TO REACH US:

Phone: 978-448-0092

Email: info@grotonhistoricalsociety.org

Website: www.grotonhistoricalsociety.org

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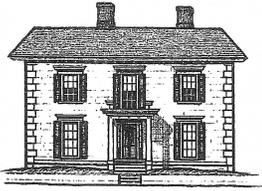
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Groton Historical Society

172 Main Street, P.O. Box 202

Groton, MA 01450

IN THIS ISSUE

- 1 Walking Through History: Groton's Soapstone Quarry
C. David Gordon
- 2 Main Street View: Thankful for a Bright and Busy Year
John H. Ott
- 3 Society Reviews Year, Votes for Bylaws and Board
Liz Strachan
- 4 Boutwell House Project Back on Track
Al Collins
- 7 Board of Directors / How to Reach Us
- 7 Membership Form

Coming Up...

19th Century American Farm Implements and their Impact on Farming in Groton - An Illustrated Talk by John Ott

Saturday April 6

2:00-4:00 PM

Groton Grange Hall
80 Champney Street



Local farmers and gardeners are always interested in finding the right tools for the job, which often are simply new versions of 19th century labor-saving devices. GHS President John Ott will tell us about the American companies who produced the types of implements and machines found on a farm, the men who promoted and encouraged their use by trying to break old habits and prejudices, and about innovations in agriculture brought about by these efforts. Come see tools, trade catalogs, agricultural periodicals, and documents from John's personal collection, some of which are on display at the Concord Museum (www.concordmuseum.org) through March 17.

This program is cosponsored by Groton Grange #7. It is free and open to the public, thanks to a grant from the Groton Commissioners of Trust Funds. Refreshments will be served. Check the websites of both organizations, www.grotonhistoricalsociety.org and www.grotongrange.com, for more details.