

Then and Now

Newsletter of the Groton Historical Society

Volume 14, Number 2

April 2013

Fitch's Bridge: Replacement Will Link Town Trails

Paul G. Funch, Groton Trails Committee

On January 26, 2013, Groton voters approved the necessary funds for the purchase and installation of a 21st century replacement for Fitch's Bridge, which has spanned the Nashua River in one form or another for more than 250 years. First built as a cart bridge, perhaps as early as 1725, then rebuilt several times after being carried away by floods, it had fallen in disrepair and was closed to all traffic in 1965 or 1966. The new bridge will bring Groton's history to life. Construction is scheduled to begin this spring, with removal of the old bridge in May, repair of the abutments in June, replacement of the old bridge with a new span in July, and opening the bridge to the public in August. Paul Funch describes here the networks of trails both east and west of the Nashua River that a "new" Fitch's Bridge will connect.

Fitch's Bridge, named after Zachariah Fitch who was hired in 1803 to maintain the bridge in its early days, had allowed people, horses and goods to cross the Nashua River for perhaps 150 years, although the first settlers saw little need to bridge the river in the beginning, there being only wilderness on the far side. If they sought hay or lumber, said Virginia May in *Plantation*, they could cross at one of several fording places along the river.

The first substantial bridge on this site was built around 1740-1750 and repaired or rebuilt over the next 120 years. The last wooden structure, built in 1871 by Luther

Blood, Groton builder and resident of the house that is now the Parish House of First Parish Church of Groton, was replaced by a steel bridge finished on February 12, 1898.

The steel bridge, built by the Berlin, CT, Iron Bridge Co., was repaired once in 1921 but had to be closed to traffic around 1965 due to lack of adequate structural integrity, and it has not been repaired since then. For a number of years it was used by pedestrians despite some warning signs and flimsy barriers, but by around 2000 the flooring had significantly deteriorated and the bridge was deemed a hazard and permanently closed off with large concrete barriers by the Town of Groton.

Trails East of the River

At the time, due to its prominence in Groton's Master Plan, there was considerable interest on the part of several town boards and committees in repairing and reopening Fitch's Bridge, and that became a primary focus for the Groton Trails Committee, newly chartered by the Selectmen in March 1998. As a result of efforts over several decades, a patchwork quilt of land parcels were acquired by a number of public and private organizations and they are all finally connected by trails to Fitch's Bridge. Along the east side of the Nashua River, a continuous trail goes by the Groton Fairgrounds, owned by the Town of Groton, then through the Taisey Conservation Restriction around the Partridgeberry development, then through Groton Place and Sabine Woods, then across Groton School grounds,

and on to Surrenden Farm (part of which is now called General Field) at the border with Ayer. After some difficulties in establishing a right of way directly along the river bank,

the Trails Committee negotiated with a private developer to obtain a trail easement across a new housing development



The present Fitch's Bridge, graciously suspended over the Nashua River since 1874, but condemned and off-limits even to foot travel since 1966, will be removed and replaced this summer by a truss bridge with weathered steel finish designed to resemble the old bridge and thus reflect part of its heritage. Photo by Russell Harris.

Continued on page 7

Main Street View: Promises of Spring

While Spring this year began on March 20th, April for me is the month that marks that season by the smell of the damp earth, with new shoots of grass popping out of the ground and by the sounds of outdoor labor. The air hums with activity as work continues on the Boutwell House and next door at Peter Benedict's new barn. At the Historical



Society, work has gone on all winter as plasterers, carpenters and other craftsmen continue their efforts to restore the House and its interior (see page 3 for Al Collins's update on rehabbing our historic museum and office space). We aren't

there yet but getting closer every day.

One promised event that has some of us crossing our fingers, in hopes that at least the front parlor of the house will be ready, is the Groton Woman's Club's planned centennial celebration scheduled to be held in that parlor in May. So being under the scrutiny of the Club's Centennial Committee, chaired by Susan Slade, we have our work cut out for us. On May 17th the Club plans to commemorate its founding and first meeting hosted on March 8, 1913, in that very room by its founder and first President Georgianna Boutwell. In this historical setting the Club will rededicate itself to its mission of community service and honor the memory of all those early organizers, members, and friends who have made the Club one of Groton's venerable and service-oriented institutions.

Celebrating Agriculture

On another front, the Society will be collaborating with the Groton Public Library in late April to produce a display-

case exhibition focused on agriculture. GHS Curator Bobbie Spiegelman and I worked together to choose printed ephemera, catalogs, periodicals, manuscripts and farm tools that reflect the enormous impact New England manufacturers, primarily in Boston and Worcester, had on farming in the 19th century. It was a formative aspect of our nation's farming history. If you aren't familiar with *The New England Farmer* or *The Massachusetts Ploughman*, two important agriculture newspapers, or how a grafting chisel or corn husking peg was used, or the impact of the Groton Farmers and Mechanics Club's fairs had on the vitality and social well being of this community, then this will be an exhibit to see and enjoy. (The photos on page 4 are a sample of items you will find in the display case.)

Many of you, I hope, were able to attend our agriculture program on Saturday April 6th at the Groton Grange Hall on Champney Street, cosponsored by the Historical Society and Groton Grange #7. I had the honor of presenting an illustrated lecture on American farm implements and their impact on local agriculture. (See more on this subject on page 5 in David Gordon's close look at the 2011 Groton Agricultural Survey Project.)

So this Spring will be busy time for the GHS board of directors and volunteers with all our "house work" of varying sorts as we strive to bring our headquarters and museum back on line before summer's end. Stay tuned and look for more about all our efforts both in our newsletter and on line at www.grotonhistoricalsociety.org. And a special thank you to all who have contributed so far to this preservation project.

*John H. Ott
President, GHS
January 2013*



Exhibition Hall of the Farmers and Mechanics Club, seen here in 1943, was home to many summer agricultural fairs held at the Hazel Grove fairgrounds at the end of Jenkins Road. Today, the Club site and Fairgrounds site are under the care of the Groton Conservation Commission. Photo from the GHS archives.

Production of *Then and Now* is made possible in part by generous donations from Middlesex Savings Bank and from Kris Kramer, Realtor, EXIT Assurance Realty, 161 Main Street, Groton, MA 01450 -- 978.807.7317 -- www.EXITassurance.com.

Boutwell House in the Homestretch:

Heat's up, Plaster's on, Finish Work Has Begun

Alvin B. Collins, Project Manager
Boutwell House Rehabilitation Project

We have seen a flurry of activity in recent months surrounding the rehabilitation of Boutwell House. Late in December National Grid finally addressed the inadequate natural gas supply coming into the house so we could fire up the large main-house boiler. By this time the outside temperatures had dipped well into the teens, with interior temperatures close behind. Once the radiators were pumped full of hot water by our efficient new gas boiler, it took a full two days to get the main house up to only 50 degrees. The first floor can now be kept at a different temperature from the second floor, and the new office space can be kept at a higher temperature that will make it more comfortable.

Air testing of the entire fire suppression system has been successfully completed and Fire Chief Joe Bosselait has been contacted to perform an inspection prior to filling the system with water. Once the system has been certified as complete and operational, paperwork will be delivered to our insurance carrier stating such, with the anticipation that the Boutwell House insurance premium will go down.

Insulating from Attic to Cellar

Once fire suppression crews were out of the house and the Building Inspector signed off on all of the work to this point, it was time for the insulators to step in. Liberty Insulation of Hubbardston was selected to insulate the house, adding insulation wherever access was available. The entire attic has been blanketed with 12 inches of cellulose insulation including over the apartment area. Wall cavities in the new office area were filled with insulation to create an area that can be heated very easily and retain heat to make it a pleasant work environment. The third-floor attic space was encapsulated from overhead with insulation to help attain a more tempered area for storage year round. The combination of a highly efficient heating system and new insulation should create a more comfortable interior in a house that is more economical to heat. Our new ADA bathroom was also insulated and will be heated with a

small electric heater to protect the pipes from freezing and keep the bathroom at a pleasant usable temperature.

Staging up for Plastering

Another visit from the Groton Building Inspector to inspect the insulation allowed us to proceed into the plastering phase. Telford Plastering of Littleton, known for older house plastering restorations, began by building staging room by room to allow work on the high ceilings in Boutwell House. All of the room ceilings on both floors of the mid and rear section of the house have now been sheathed with blueboard and replastered. The dining room walls were covered with plastic sheets to protect the old wallpaper from plaster drips and splatters as the plasterer worked overhead. Replastering was done in lieu of repairing to eliminate the possibility of the cracks reappearing and because it is likely that all of these ceilings were originally painted with calcimine. Calcimine was easy to apply, covered evenly and looked great when done but new paints do not stick to it well. As years go by and coat upon coat of new paint is put over calcimine, the weight of the newer paint eventually makes the paint peel causing unsightly conditions that are difficult to repair.

On the other hand, the interior walls in this part of the house have had most of the cracks repaired and a few door openings have been in-filled to create better traffic flow. Our feeling was that by repairing the wall cracks instead of replastering, we could retain the older character of the rooms with original wall plaster.

Trimming Out

Next we move on to finish carpentry, installing interior trim in the areas disturbed by the renovations. Baseboards and door trim will be fabricated to match trim in the same areas as closely as possible. Once interior trim is complete, the painters can begin painting the office area, followed by the plumber and electrician in an effort to get the new office up and running as soon as possible. And, once the new office is open, we can really get organized to bring life to Boutwell House once again. ■



From left: dining room protected with plastic sheeting, office insulated, wallboard installed, replastering done.

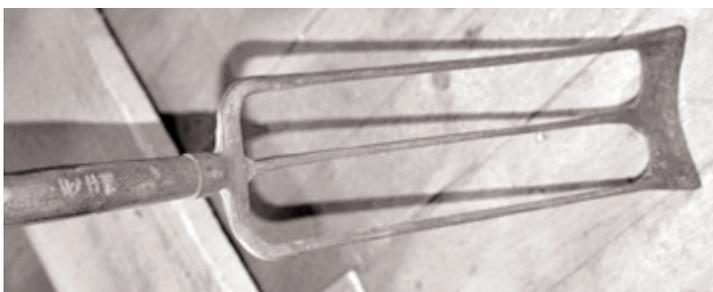
Did You Know.....



that while contemporary residents of Groton begin about now to dream of the luscious tomatoes they will grow in their gardens this season, this was not always so? It wasn't until about 1840 that the first tomatoes were grown in Groton. That was when William Lawrence of Boston sent some young plants to Groton on a stagecoach driven by Aaron Corey (the UPS man of his day?). The recipient was Dr. Joshua Green who gave them to Eliab Going Bolton, an experienced gardener in town. Mr. Bolton watched over them with great care as they were growing. Dr. Samuel Green writes in *The Natural History and the Topography of Groton, Massachusetts*, Volume 1, p. 103, "I remember with what great curiosity they were regarded by persons interested in such matters; and how the fruit as it ripened was carefully distributed in the neighborhood for trial and judgment. According to my recollection, the verdict at first was an unfavorable one; but this has long since been set aside, and a later tribunal has decreed otherwise. It has been decided that the tomato stands on the border-line of necessity, and has come to stay."

--E.S.

Photo Preview of Agricultural Display at GPL



Bobbie Spiegelman, GHS Curator, and John Ott, GHS President and collector of 19th-century farm implements, have gathered some of John's farm tools, catalogs, and periodicals for display at the Groton Public Library in late April and May (see page 8 for details). The items pictured here may or may not be in the exhibit. You will have to go and see. How many of the photos can you match to their descriptions?

Harness maker's vise to hold leather straps for mending; open-frame tilling spade that is easier to drive into the earth; BUCH #706 heavy double-drum spiked lawn aerator; hatchel, a bed of nail spikes used to straighten and clean flax for spinning; tire measuring wheel (also called a traveler) used to measure the circumference of wheel rims; cranberry scoop with blunted iron teeth that won't damage the berries. Photos by Bobbie Spiegelman.

Farming in Groton: Survival, Subsistence, Niche Markets

C. David Gordon, GHS Member

What was the historic Groton like? Wasn't it a farming community, a quiet, sleepy little town? Weren't the farms pretty much alike: a modest house, a barn, perhaps one or two outbuildings, a milk cow or two, a few cattle, some chickens, possibly a couple of pigs, and a few acres given over to vegetables and even fruits, grassy meadows, and a woodlot? Not entirely so, concludes the final report of the Groton Agricultural Survey Project, prepared in 2011 by Oakfield Research of Concord, MA, which identifies different eras in Groton's agricultural history, from settlement down to the present, and describes how farming practices changed to meet the challenges of history and technology.

In colonial days farming was close to a survival existence, undertaken despite the danger of Indian attack yet including some small attempts to market goods to others. The Whitney farmstead, in continuous operation since 1684, became a subsistence farm by the early 18th century, when farmers had "enough crops, livestock, and help to sustain their families." This was before the industrial revolution, according to the report, when farmers as a rule rather than an exception worked other occupations around their farming. The Blood farm began in this era.

Industrial Revolution Intrudes

The 19th century brought the "Yankee Farm" – one started in the previous century and gradually coming under the influence of the industrial revolution. Farmers grew Irish potatoes to feed the new immigrants from Ireland and Canada working in the new big city mills. William Bainbridge in Groton kept as many as 2,000 Merino sheep for their wool. Farm families could do piecework at home assembling products from parts manufactured in the mills. It was a time of experimenting, growing mulberry trees to try to obtain silk, raising hops, having a first look at tomatoes. Irish Catholic Groton farmer James Fitzpatrick ran a "Yankee Farm."

The coming of the railroad to Groton had a decided effect on farming practices, for example, dairy farmers could ship butter and cheese to a wider market. This was also a time of great interest in learning the latest scientific methods and practices of farming through subscribing to periodicals and joining farming organizations.

Gentlemen Farmers Change the Scene

The town itself at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century attracted wealthy and educated outsiders to build estates here. Local "gentleman farmer" James Lawrence was joined by the Danielsons, the Sabines, and the Dumaines, who were drawn in part by the charm of Groton as well as its private schools and easy access to



Town-owned Williams Barn on Chicopee Row, circa 1840, speaks directly to farming in Groton in years past, conveying a sense of being there in mind and spirit through agriculturally related events held year-round and the Friday Farmers Market in summer and early fall. Photo by C. David Gordon.

cities by train. They formed the Groton Hunt Club, changing the land as they constructed bridle paths across their properties.

The estate farms called for a new managerial class. The report notes that the Lowthorpe School, in business in Groton from 1901 to 1945, offered degrees for women in garden design and horticulture pertaining especially to estates. William P. Wharton introduced forest management through the Town Memorial Forest and his Wharton Plantation.

By the 1930s, according to the report, Groton had ceased to be a marketing town and was less reliant on agriculture. There was a 40-year period in farming history (1949-1998) when many small farm operations had shut down. The report gives a full account of a new kind of farm established in Groton during that time—Gibbet Hill Farm, a large beef-raising enterprise owned by Marion Campbell and managed by Bill Conley. It was an all but self-sufficient farm with its 600 cows and 1,000 acres (many of them making again productive unused farm land).

Since the days of Campbell and her farm, Groton has seen a resurgence of small farms, many of them filling a marketing niche like the farming operation of John and Laurie Smigelski, which meets increased demand for hay.

Summing up the present state of farming in this "sleepy town" of Groton, the report concludes, "Every generation [of farmers] worked with less land, less family help, higher costs, more regulations than the one before it." Groton is considered to be more fortunate than other towns as regards its natural resources. Farming is recognized as vital to the town's culture and its biodiversity. But, in the last two decades, the demand for residential development and a depressed farm market have been a threat to continued farming. ■

Treasures of History: Groton's Town Diaries, 1918-1971

Susanne Olson, Reference Librarian
Groton Public Library

Groton may be unusual in having an appointed Town Diarist, a tradition that continues to this day. The Groton Public Library holds 18 volumes of the Town Diaries, spanning the years 1918-1971. They are a unique historical resource for the town, and over these years, seven women served consecutively as diarists—Emma Blood, Marion Torrey, Ella and Claribel Vickery, Susie Shattuck, Virginia May, and Isabel Beal. They recorded local happenings and gave national and international events a local context.

In the early years, the diarists wrote longhand descriptions and copied poems. Later pages are typewritten, and the diaries begin to look more like scrapbooks filled with newspaper clippings, event programs, photos and other memorabilia. Browsing the pages (over 3000 in all), we learn about the big storms and fires, tragic accidents, school graduations, fundraiser events and charitable work, new buildings appearing around town, soldiers going off to war, epidemics, town celebrations, and many other things.

Groton has no complete collection of old newspapers, so these diaries are a vital source of information about the town in the 20th century. Over time, however, the original volumes became increasingly fragile and brittle. In 2005 and 2006 the Groton Public Library Endowment Trust funded a major project to conserve them. Each volume was carefully cleaned and repaired. The work included deacidification of newsprint and wood pulp papers, as well as removal of discolored cellophane tape. Each page was also microfilmed to ensure the long-term preservation of its content. At the end of the project, the microfilm version of the Town Diaries was digitally scanned, and converted to

image files that can be viewed over the Internet.

Starting in 2007, staff and loyal volunteers at the library have been working to index the Town Diaries and make them available for online viewing through the library's website under the Groton Public Library Digital Collection (<http://books.gpl.org/grotonstone/cgi-bin/library.cgi>). [There is also a direct link to this collection from the homepage of the Groton Historical Society website under Links.] Indexing has so far been completed for the years 1918-1963. Anyone can browse the volumes page by page, or look up specific dates, places, people, or subjects in the index. Pages on the Hurricane of 1938 are especially interesting, as are these samples of April entries, from four of the early diarists.

April 27, 1928: The telephone subscribers in town, starting this Friday morning, are to be served from the new office at the corner of Main and Court streets...The switchboard is up-to-date in every detail and is large enough to provide for the ever-increasing telephone population of the town... In town today there are about 550 telephones. Most of these are main telephones, but in many modern homes there is a telephone on each floor. In the front of the office an illuminated sign will direct the people to an all-night public telephone. [Marion Torrey]

April 14, 1934: Passenger service will be discontinued on the Boston and Maine railroad, between Worcester and Nashua beginning April 15th. Bus service will take its place. [Ella Vickery]

April 1941: And now we record what is already known at the 'great fire,' the most ever known: with some 600 acres of W. P. Wharton's 'plantation' destroyed among the many, many more acres, buildings, etc. ... None who watched that terrible demon sweep across acre after acre beginning early in the afternoon of April 28 can ever forget and the expression 'like wild fire' will remain a vivid description of those three days of horror! ... At no time was the town threatened but the pall of smoke was everywhere, miles from the fire... All three days there were steady calls to town hall for more men to help in the fight. By night of the first day Groton's Red Cross were on the job to feed the tired fighters. All bread, practically, in homes and stores was used for sandwiches which were served with hot coffee. It was said that some of the CCC boys had been without food nearly a day, having fought another fire before coming to Groton, but for all this, there were those deserving of severe punishment, sightseers eating the Red Cross food!! [Susie Shattuck]

April 1964: Some of our Massachusetts people choose to go south and make themselves heard and seen in protests against segregation. [Virginia May] ■



The earliest pages of the Groton Town Diaries are entirely handwritten, in tidy cursive script. Later volumes combine photos and newspaper clippings with handwritten or typed commentary. Diaries covering the years 1918 through 1971 have been cleaned, repaired, deacidified, microfilmed, and digitally scanned. They can all be accessed online. Photo by Susanne Olson.

Fitch's Bridge Continued from page 1

on Gratuity Rd. This easement was recorded in the deed and provides a trail from the Farmers and Mechanics parcel north to Gratuity Rd. near its intersection with Fitch's Bridge Rd. At that point, Fitch's Bridge Rd. is a dead-end dirt road that goes through the working farm of Gary Wilkins, whose farm stand is on Rte. 119, thus providing a safe and scenic path to Fitch's Bridge as well as a reminder of agriculture's importance to Groton.

Also on the east side of the Nashua River, hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians can take Fitch's Bridge Rd. east to Nod Rd., where they can access the state-owned J. Harry Rich Tree Farm State Forest, which connects with the Nashua River Rail Trail. An alternative route to the Rail Trail is to take Gratuity Rd. to Arlington St., where there is a steep unpaved access to the Rail Trail. From the Rail Trail, other trails connect nearly continuously to the eastern, northern, and southern borders of Groton. Altogether there are over 70 miles of trails east of the Nashua River that are part of that area's evolving trails network.

Trails West of the River

On the west side of the Nashua River there are another 30 miles of trails forming West Groton's trails network. A continuous trail on the west side of the river was just completed in December 2012 with the addition of a conservation restriction along 1.3 miles of the historic Brookline and Pepperell Railroad right-of-way. This trail goes south all the way to the Groton Town Forest, via the Blood Land acquired by the West Groton Water District, and to the Squannacook River along the border with Ayer. Trails also head west toward The Throne through parcels owned by the Groton Conservation Commission, the Groton Conservation Trust, and the New England Forestry Foundation. A continuous trail goes all the way across The Throne to Rockwood Lane near the Bertozzi Wildlife Area on the Squannacook River.

Once the work of removing the old bridge structure and replacing it with a new span safe for pedestrians, horses, and bike riders is done, the 70 miles of trails on the east side of the Nashua River will be directly linked to the 30 miles of trails on the west side. The new bridge will ensure this historical and vital connection for another 75 years - the expected lifespan of the bridge.

Modes of transportation and recreational needs change over time, but the importance of connections from one part of Groton to another will always remain. Without any doubt, the single most important recreational connection for Groton has been, and continues to be, Fitch's Bridge. ■



Wide web of trails converge at Fitch's Bridge. Trail maps are available from Town Hall and from the Trails Committee website, www.grotontrails.org.

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

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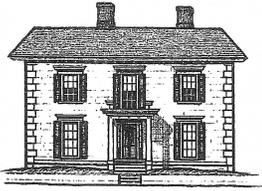
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Coming Up . . .

New Exhibit at GPL--Celebrating Agriculture in Groton

Opening late April – in the display case outside the Historical Room (3rd floor) at the Groton Public Library – a selection of artifacts from John Ott's personal collection of 19th-century farm tools, catalogs, and periodicals that changed forever farming methods in Groton and elsewhere in the wake of the Industrial Revolution.

The exhibit recognizes our town's agricultural heritage and anticipates the first annual Agricultural Fair at Hazel Grove Fairgrounds, resurrecting a tradition that celebrated our farming communities in past centuries. The Ag Fair is scheduled for Sunday August 18 -- look for details in the July issue of *Then and Now* and on the GHS website.



Farmers Bulletins were produced by the US Dept. of Agriculture, Office of Experiment Stations, Washington, D.C., to describe experimental farming practices thought to be of general interest to farmers. Forty-three states had Experiment Stations in the 1890s. The one in Massachusetts was (and still is) in Amherst. John Ott's collection of 479 bulletins bound in 17 volumes covers the years 1890 to 1911. The bulletins offered, John says, "a wealth of information on countless ag and farm topics from barnyard manure to how to build an ice house."