
Charlton Historical Society Newsletter

Spring, 2008

News for Charlton Historical Society Members

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Buffumville Dam and Flood Control Project Turns 50

By Jamie Kordack

The site where the village of Buffumville was established was first developed as a mill seat in 1812. The 183-acre tract was situated in both Oxford and Charlton. In that year, brothers Alexander and Jonathan Nichols built a dam and sawmill on the Little River. In 1815, they built a two-story house, and in 1818, a gristmill. In 1823, the mill, house and scythe making and blacksmithing shop, plus 29 acres of land were sold to Sterns Witt. "Sterns Witt and Brothers" began making cotton thread in part of the grist mill. For a short time starting in 1832, axes were also manufactured at the mill. As thread manufacturing increased, for a time, spools were also made. On 25 May, 1842, the mill was burned and business suspended. The present brick structure was built in 1847 when the property came in the hands of Charles L. Harding, who fitted it for the manufacture of broadcloths and doeskins. This business continued until 1852 when he sold to Moses Buffum and Edward Thayer, Thayer moving on in 1855.

The village got its name from Moses Buffum, a successful miller and businessman, who was born July 10, 1800 in Smithfield, Rhode Island. He began a hat making business in Slatersville, Massachusetts at the age of 18, and soon became a part-owner of a satinet mill in Millville, Massachusetts. He became the sole owner of that mill in 1834, and continued to enlarge his business until the mill burned in 1849. In 1852, Moses Buffum relocated to Oxford (now the South East corner of Charlton), Massachusetts and ran the mill manufacturing cassimere's (fine woolen goods). The community around his mill became known as Buffumville. Moses continued in his milling business on the Little River at Buffumville until his death in 1874. Moses Buffum was a prominent business man in Oxford. In his "History of the Town of Oxford" (1892), George Daniels has this to say about Moses Buffum: "He had a good business ability and tenacity of purpose, was conscientious and careful for the rights of others, early an anti-slavery man and a Free Soil voter, and was highly respected by all. He was among the most successful businessmen of the town, and died wealthy."

The mill still exists on the shore of Buffums Pond and is home to many businesses.

In the 1920's, on the South West shore of the pond and along Gale Road, the land was subdivided into small "summer cottage" lots, called Community Park and

Lakeside Park. The land scheme was to be the first of Charlton's subdivisions. Most were not built upon when the US Army Corps of Engineers took over the area for its new flood control project. Before the project though, the Little River had a section upstream known locally as Colicum Reservoir. Named for Colicum who was the last Nipmuck Indian residing in Oxford. He drowned while fishing in the Little River.¹

There was no such thing as a federal flood-control dam before spring floods swept the Northeast in 1936. The devastation, including \$66 million in property damage and 11 dead, turned the political tide in favor of granting the federal government the right to seize land in one state to build a dam intended to prevent flooding in another state.

Floods continued elsewhere, especially on the Ohio River. Additionally, during the 1930s, there was the misery caused by the Great Depression. Flooding from the hurricane that struck New England in 1938, leaving 650 to 700 dead, coincided with the passage of a second federal Flood Control Act. Responding to the twin needs for flood protection and work relief, Congress passed the 1936 Flood Control Act, one of the most important events in the history of the Corps of Engineers.

As defined by the Flood Control Acts of 1928 and 1936, the role of government agencies was to build massive flood control structures to control the great rivers, protect coastal areas and prevent flash flooding. For the first time, Congress declared that flood control was a proper activity of the federal government. The act put the Corps firmly into the reservoir construction business, despite earlier Corps' reservations about the effectiveness of reservoirs. It also established that a potential project's economic benefits must exceed its costs. Furthermore, the act specified the obligations that would have to be assumed by local interests before the Corps could begin certain projects. The 1936 act alone authorized construction of some 250 projects for both flood control and relief work.²

Buffumville Lake Flood Control Dam was one of over 30 dams planned for New England in that legislation or soon afterward. Nine federal flood-control dams were built in New England between 1941 and 1952. But as the devastation from the floods of 1936 and 1938 faded from memory, so did the zeal for

¹ "History of the Town of Oxford, Massachusetts with Genealogies and Notes on Persons and Estates", George F. Daniels, 1892.

² <http://www.hq.usace.army.mil/history/brief2.htm>

pursuing construction of the remaining dams. Congress failed to appropriate funds. Meanwhile, negotiations continued over how Connecticut and Massachusetts, which would benefit most from the dams in Vermont and New Hampshire, would compensate those states which would lose thousands of acres - land that was the source of local property taxes - to the projects.

In 1953, the four states signed a Connecticut River Valley Flood Control Compact. The compact promised "that states benefiting from construction" of flood-control dams would "make reimbursement for such loss of taxes and for such hardships." Whether the states have lived up to that compact is still under debate.

And then came the hurricane season of 1955. In August 1955, Connie and Diane landed a one-two punch on New England. The floods killed 87 people and caused hundreds of millions of dollars in damage. Newspaper editorials rued the un-built dams. Surely, they said, those dams could have saved lives in the storms. The year's floods had softened hearts in Washington, too. Federal funding was approved, and the pace of construction quickened.³

During the 1955 flood, many manufacturers adjacent to the French River experienced extensive damage to their properties. The hurricane-induced flood caused \$61,680,000 of damage throughout the Thames Basin. The Buffumville Dam and Reservoir was the first of a group of four dams required to control the flow of the rivers. The others were East Brimfield Dam, Westville Lake and Hodges Village Dam. Had Buffumville and Hodges dams been in existence in 1955, 17.1 million dollars in flood damages could have been prevented.

Buffumville Dam is located 1.3 miles above the point where the Little River flows into the French River. Completed at a cost of \$3 million, the dam is part of a system of six flood control projects designed and built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the Thames River Basin. This system controls flooding from Oxford, Massachusetts, to Long Island Sound. To date, Buffumville Dam has prevented damages of \$26.8 million (2006 data).

Buffumville Lake has a peak storage capacity of 5.2 billion gallons to minimize downstream flooding. At maximum storage, the flood control pool rises 42 feet above the normal recreation pool. This flood water is stored on approximately 500 acres of public land. The U.S. Government purchased the rights to store flood waters on another 273 acres of private land. Much of this flood easement lands borders privately-owned Pierpoint Meadows Pond.⁴

In April 2008, Buffumville Dam turns 50. The multi-use recreation and flood damage reduction resource

offers the public many things- protection from storms, many forms of recreation like hiking, fishing, boating, disc golf, and picnicking, a lovely green-space in the town of Charlton where folks can come out to relax and learn about their little piece of public land and finally, a place of and for commitment effecting a sense of belonging in the community. On August 9th, there will be a 50th birthday party held at the dam site, complete with birthday cake and tours of the dam. Everyone is invited!

Walls Can Talk!

By Cindy Cooper

Patterns adorn walls according to the needs of the occupants. The Rider Tavern has outstanding examples of wall decoration that were discovered under layers of wallpaper. Original stenciling is found in the ballroom and parlor, with the pattern reproduced in other portions of those rooms for continuity. The original stenciling in the widow's sitting room does not appear to have a pattern. It is so unique it has been documented in *Decorator* magazine. Examples of original grain painting are found in the taproom and the Lafayette dining room.

Not all walls in the building would have had such decoration when first built. Some walls would have been painted; others would have had wallpaper. The layers of wallpaper found in the Rider Tavern have been examined to determine which areas had the earliest wallpaper applied. One area that had early wallpaper is the landing at the top of the stairs. The entry hall and landing are priority areas for work this year. Papering and painting will provide not only a picture of how the areas are likely to have looked, but also an opportunity to educate visitors about the various wall decorations used in the 1800s.

Custom manufacturers today use the same techniques used in early wallpaper to recreate the effect. The process includes hand applying the paint, leaving a small edge without paint showing on each side. Wallpaper hangers then trim this excess before matching the design and applying the paper. Recreating the wallpaper and hanging it are each time-consuming and expensive procedures. Fortunately, CHS has received a grant from the Greater Worcester Community Foundation to offset some of the expense associated with the project. Custom wallpaper with a period design has been ordered. A professional wallpaper hanger with experience in reproduction work will correct some wall and ceiling deficiencies, paint the ceiling and upper trim, prepare the walls for the paper, and hang the reproduction wallpaper. Volunteers will paint the entry hall and wainscoting in the landing. If you would like to participate in the painting, please call 508-248-3202 to leave a message.

³ The Hartford Current, By Madeline Bodin, August 14, 2005.

⁴ <http://www.nae.usace.army.mil/recreati/bvl/bvlflood.htm>

Calendar of Events

April 19 Bus Tours of Historic Sites

9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Last year, the Charlton Historical Society's historic sites bus tour sold out. This year, the opportunity is doubled, and the price is reduced to \$5.00 per person! Choose the time most convenient for you to discover Charlton's history. Two tours to the same sites are scheduled on April 19th. William O. Hultgren, local author of three books related to Charlton history, will narrate the bus tours leaving from the Rider Tavern, 255 Stafford Street. Sites include the locations of former mills, schools, taverns, the trolley, and houses where early citizens lived. Volunteers will provide guided tours of the historic 1799 Rider Tavern for participants after each bus tour is complete. Partial funding for this event is provided by a grant from the Charlton Cultural Council, in conjunction with the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Pre-register (required) or ask questions by calling 508-248-3202 to leave a message. Someone will return your call. (Participants: please arrive about 15 minutes before your scheduled departure time).

May 17 Yard Sale

8:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at Rider Tavern

Come early for the best selection. Search through the treasures to find vintage jewelry, decorations, household items, bottles, books, and furniture. Proceeds benefit the restoration of the Rider Tavern and the presentation of historical programs.

June 16 Annual Meeting

7:00 p.m. at Rider Tavern

A summary of the past year's activities will be followed by a presentation on the creation of the Buffumville Dam fifty years ago. Jamie Kordack, Ranger at the Army Corps of Engineers at Buffumville Recreation Area, will provide the history, and Marty Sleeper, former owner of Camp Wamsutta, will recall his experience as an immediate neighbor watching the dam's progress.

July 13 and August 10 Rider Tavern Tours

1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Guides will tell about the Worcester and Stafford Turnpike, stagecoaches, taverns, businesses in the area, prominent residents in the early 1800s, and early wall decorations (stenciling, wallpaper, and grain painting) while you tour the building completed in 1799. Donation: \$1.00.

September 1 Old Home Day

10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. on the town common

Look at a display of the effect of the hurricane of 1938, view the Charlton High School yearbook from 50 years ago, receive a free newsletter, and shop for Charlton History books and memorabilia.

October 5 Charlton History Day

Noon to 4:00 p.m.

Enjoy the Heritage String Band, play period games, watch spinning and sewing demonstrations, view displays, and explore the historic Rider Tavern. Free.

Thank You

We appreciate the generosity of the following members and area businesses. Their contributions are essential resources that allow CHS to open the tavern for guided tours, provide programs and events, and continue the restoration work in the Rider Tavern. We could not preserve and celebrate Charlton's history without their financial support.

Member Support

George Brown
Patricia and Alyse Bukoski
Maria Isabel and Gerry Lapierre
Mitzi McKenna

Corporate Sponsor

Casella Waste Systems

Grants

Greater Worcester Community Foundation
C. LeRoy Miller Foundation
Charlton Cultural Council
Massachusetts Cultural Council

In the next month, CHS will be sending members and businesses renewal and contribution opportunity letters. Please be generous. Your contribution is tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law. Send donations to:

Charlton Historical Society
P.O. Box 252
Charlton, MA 01507

Typist Wanted

Historical reference materials and books provide the resources to research many local history questions. Jane Pederson, a librarian, volunteered her time to assist with the organization of the CHS library of books and resources. The next step is to type library cards and book labels using a manual typewriter. We need a typist to help. The typing project is expected to take approximately 90 hours to complete, and hours are flexible. A stipend of \$10 per hour to finish the project in that timeframe is available. If interested, please call Cindy Cooper at 508-248-7840.

Board of Directors

Nominations for the Board of Directors continue until our annual meeting. The Board promotes the interests of the Society. Responsibilities, dispersed among the Board according to their areas of interest, include researching local history, organizing archives, serving as treasurer, maintenance of the tavern, decorating, coordinating activities, writing publications, and fundraising. If you are interested in joining the Board of Directors, please call Cindy Cooper at 508-248-7840.

Charlton Historical Society
P. O. Box 252
Charlton, MA 01507

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Charlton, MA 01507

Date _____

Name _____

Address _____

Type of Membership:

____ Individual \$5.00 ____ Family \$10.00

____ Life \$50.00

____ Renewal ____ New Member

I would like to volunteer at an event or be a member
of the board of directors. Phone _____

____ Enclosed is a donation of \$ _____

Comments:

www.CharltonHistoricalSociety.org
508-248-3202

Board of Directors

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Barbara Dean

Glenn Ellis

Claudia Lacerte

Coming Events:

April 19 Bus Tours

May 17 Yard Sale

June 16 Annual meeting

July 13 Tavern tour

August 10 Tavern tour

September 1 Old home Day

October 5 History Day