



MANSFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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April 2015

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Spring arrived a couple weeks ago but we certainly can't tell that from the daily temperatures. We had many snowstorms this winter that continued to accumulate deep drifts on our roofs and in our yards. Unlike most winters, the frigid temperatures didn't result in much snow melt between storms. But at long last, the natural cycle is beginning to take hold. Over the past week rain melted much of the snow and daffodils are beginning to poke through the thawing earth.

Our first program for 2015 will be presented by former Connecticut State Archaeologist Nicholas Bellantoni on May 8th. This is sure to be both informative and entertaining.

Two new exhibits are being prepared. The first will focus on the life of one family as revealed through their diaries. The diaries of Martin and Almira (Hibbard) Parker span from 1862 to 1907. The other exhibit will revisit the construction of the Mansfield Hollow Dam, completed in 1952. This year is the 60th anniversary of the 1955 flood following Hurricane Diane. It was the first time that the new dam filled with water and proved its worth. The Mansfield Historical Society Museum opening will be on Sunday, June 7th. I hope to see you there.

We appreciate the efforts of all our volunteers. If you wish to help out at the Mansfield Historical Society, we would be happy to have your assistance. If you have ideas for future museum exhibits or programs, we would love to hear them. Please contact the museum at 860-429-6575 or mansfield.historical@snet.net to volunteer.

Keith Wilson, President



The museum buried in snow. This was the scene from late January into early March.



MARK YOUR CALENDARS – UPCOMING EVENTS

Friday, May 8, 7:30 p.m.: May Meeting and Program

Nicholas Bellantoni, Connecticut State Archaeologist, *emeritus* will present a special program "Looking Back....Greatest Hits of the State Archaeologist." This program will be held in the **Town Council Chambers** at the Audrey P. Beck Municipal Building (4 South Eagleville Road).

Sunday, June 7, 1:30 – 4:30 p.m.: Museum Opening

NICHOLAS BELLANTONI TO REVIEW HIGHLIGHTS OF HIS CAREER



At our annual meeting last September, we met the new State Archaeologist, Brian D. Jones, who gave an interesting talk about the latest research on prehistoric peoples.

At our May meeting, his predecessor, Nicholas F. Bellantoni will look back on his 27-year-career as Connecticut's State Archaeologist. He will present an overview of the many fascinating projects he has worked on. His work within Connecticut has encompassed modern forensic investigations, early Native American sites, colonial farmsteads, historic cemeteries and industrial mills. He has also consulted on forensic investigations in other states and even abroad. For his presentation, he will select from some of his most interesting projects, including "vampires," the Hunley submarine, Adolf Hitler, Samuel Huntington, Venture Smith, Albert Afraid of Hawk, Squire Elisha Pitkin, Gershom Bulkeley, and a host of others. Bellantoni is a popular speaker and is much in demand, even in retirement. You won't want to miss his talk.

Dr. Bellantoni serves as the state archaeologist *emeritus* with the Connecticut State Museum of Natural History and Archaeology Center at the University of Connecticut. He received his doctorate in anthropology from UConn in 1987 and was shortly thereafter appointed state archaeologist. His duties were many, but primarily included the preservation of archaeological sites in the state. He serves as an Adjunct Associate Research Professor in the Department of Anthropology at UConn, and is a former State Commissioner for the Commission on Culture and Tourism. He sat on the State Historic Preservation Council for over twelve years and is a former President of the National Association of State Archaeologists. His research background includes the analysis of skeletal remains from eastern North America. He has been excavating in Connecticut for almost 40 years.

We hope you will join us on **Friday, May 8, at 7:30 p.m.** for this interesting program. Please note the change from our usual venue. **This program will be held in the Town Council Chambers at the Audrey Beck Municipal Building.** Admission is free to members and children under 16; \$3.00 for non-members.

ANNOUNCING OUR 2015 EXHIBITS

In 2008 Nancy Avery gave the Mansfield Historical Society a large collection of diaries written by two of her ancestors, Martin Parker (1839-1898) and his wife Almira (Hibbard) Parker (1846-1907). The diaries span from the time of the Civil War to 1907. Our main exhibit this summer will chronicle the life of this family as revealed through their daily record-keeping.

This exhibit marks the completion of a multi-year effort to transcribe the diaries. Lisa Ferriere, Jane Seeber, Nancy Kline, Louisa Sonstroem, and Ann Galonska worked on this massive transcription project. While snowbound this winter, our student intern, Melissa Traub, and Ann Galonska finished transcribing the few remaining diaries. The diaries not only tell the story of a fascinating family but provide a window into the world in which they lived.

The Parkers lived most of their married life in Coventry in a house on Bunker Hill Road that they called the "Martin Box". Their activities and family connections encompassed much of the local area, including Mansfield, Ashford, Columbia and Willimantic.



Almira Hibbard Parker

Almira's diaries reflect the 19th century woman's realm that revolved around child-care and housework. Martin's diaries document his seasonal farming activities and other labor. The diaries are rich with descriptions of their daily work and activities.

Both Martin and Almira taught school throughout their lives and recognized the value of higher education. Although they only had a grammar school education themselves, they sent their daughters to Mt. Holyoke Women's Seminary (now Mt. Holyoke College) and their sons attended the Storrs Agricultural College.

Besides managing the family farm and teaching school, Martin ran a wood business with his two sons. He also worked on many construction projects and served as a farmhand for others. In his later years he worked for the Experiment Station at the Storrs Agricultural College. This led to his appointment in 1893 as superintendent of the Connecticut Crop Exhibit at the World's Fair in Chicago.

Along with raising a family of four children and maintaining the household, Almira became a prolific

writer. She served as the local correspondent to several newspapers and submitted freelance articles to numerous magazines. She also began to write a novel about her life that was never published. Part of the unfinished manuscript is in our collection.

Almira was also an avid gardener, documenting in her diaries the hundreds of perennials, annuals and roses she grew. Martin too kept detailed records of the many vegetables, fruits, and other crops he raised. Rudy Favretti has found illustrations of many of the plants mentioned in the diaries and is preparing a display about the Parker's horticultural efforts.

Although the main focus of the exhibit will be on the lives of Martin and Almira Parker, one section will profile two other remarkable women in the family: their daughter, Orra Parker Phelps, and their granddaughter, Orra A. Phelps, M.D. A common thread runs through the lives of these family members. Almira, her daughter Orra, and granddaughter Orra were all intelligent, strong, independent-minded women. In their own way, each moved beyond the traditional roles for women as defined by their generation. Almira's interest in botany and nature also passed on to both her daughter and granddaughter.

Orra Parker Phelps is best known in this area as the author of *When I was a Girl in the Martin Box*. This book describes her experiences growing up in Coventry during the 1870s-1880s. In 1891 Orra married Charles S. Phelps, then a professor at the Storrs Agricultural School. They had seven children. Like her mother, Orra found an outlet from the daily drudgery of housework through writing and being outside in nature. She had studied botany at Mt. Holyoke and became an accomplished botanist. She identified, collected and preserved thousands of plant specimens in Connecticut and New York. Her botanical collection is now housed at the University of Connecticut.

Of all the Phelps children, the oldest daughter, Orra, most shared her mother's love of nature and botany. She enjoyed tramping through the woods, fields, and swamps on her mother's botanizing trips. Like her mother, she attended Mt. Holyoke where she studied geology and soon discovered an interest in medicine. In 1927 Orra Phelps earned her medical degree at Johns Hopkins Medical School – a major accomplishment in a field dominated by men. The following year she began her career as a physician in Montgomery County, New York.

Dr. Phelps' childhood love of hiking never faded and the outside world always called to her. Over her lifetime she hiked thousands of miles and

climbed all 46 Adirondack High Peaks. She became one of the most influential members of the early Adirondack Mountain Club. In 1934 she wrote the ADK's first comprehensive trail guide to the Adirondack High Peaks Region.

This exhibit has been made possible by generous donations and loans of family photographs and memorabilia by Mary Arakelian, Nancy Avery and David Hayden. The Coventry Historical Society has also partnered with us on this project. They have provided photographs of many local sites mentioned in the diaries. Materials from other sources, including the University of Connecticut and the historical societies in Andover, Columbia and Manchester, have all been brought together to tell the story of one exceptional family.

REVISITING THE MANSFIELD HOLLOW FLOOD CONTROL PROJECT

Our other new exhibit will be located in the Old Town Hall building. It will focus on the construction of the Mansfield Hollow Dam, completed in 1952. Today the Mansfield Hollow Dam and reservoir is a popular recreation area, but in the 1940s, the flood control project was the source of much controversy and hardship. The exhibit will examine the development of the flood control project, the controversy surrounding it, the properties lost to the dam construction, and the final proof of its value.



Constructing the Mansfield Hollow Dam, 1949-1952

The story of the Mansfield Hollow dam begins with the 1938 hurricane. The disastrous floods following that storm led the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to begin studying the flooding problems in the Thames River Basin. In 1940 they developed a plan for the construction of a system of seven reservoirs – four located in the upper Quinebaug

Basin in Massachusetts and three located in the upper Shetucket Basin in Connecticut. The three units planned for Connecticut were located at Mansfield Hollow on the Natchaug River, at South Coventry on the Willimantic River and at Andover on the Hop River.

The plan was immediately hailed by the areas around Norwich where the most flood damage was suffered, but it met heavy resistance in communities where the dams were planned. The protest was loudest and strongest in Mansfield where the largest dam was to be constructed.

The reservoirs planned for South Coventry and Andover were ultimately dropped, while the Mansfield project moved forward. However, in response to citizen protests, the Mansfield Hollow dam was redesigned to affect fewer property owners.

In July, 1949 construction of the dam began and land acquisition proceeded. The U.S. Government took over 2,300 acres of land in Mansfield, North Windham and Chaplin. Some 200 families lost property and over 30 homes were destroyed, dismantled or moved to new locations.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the Hurricane Diane and the flood in its aftermath. This was the first test of the newly completed Mansfield Hollow Dam and it proved its worth. The gates of the new dam were closed and the dam filled to almost 67% of its capacity. The water was then safely released over the course of the next several weeks. The Army Corps of Engineers estimated that it reduced flood damage along the Natchaug and Shetucket Rivers by some \$3,190,000. The protests over the dam died thereafter.

We first presented an exhibit about the Mansfield Hollow Dam in 1997. This year's display will build upon the earlier exhibit with the addition of many new materials provided by Bill Altomare. His father, Rex Altomare, was one of the Army Corps' lead engineers on the flood control project. He was in charge of inspecting all the concrete work for the dam. Upon completion of the dam, he became as the resident dam tender, serving in that position for 21 years from 1952 to 1973.

THE MUSEUM OPENING is scheduled for Sunday, June 7th. Details will follow in the next newsletter.

The museum will be open thereafter on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, 1:30 – 4:30 p.m., through the end of September. We look forward to seeing you there!

CALL FOR HOSTS & HOSTESSES

As our museum opening approaches, we are again seeking volunteers to host at the museum during the summer. Please consider volunteering for this duty and take pride in sharing our museum with the public. Greeting guests in our air-conditioned museum is a pleasant way to spend a hot summer afternoon.

IMPORTANT NEW INFORMATION: You may now sign up to host online at our web site <http://www.mansfieldct-history.org>. We need two folks each Saturday and Sunday from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. Instructions are available and we encourage you to sign up regardless of whether you have hosted before or not.

To sign up, go to the web site and click on the Hosts/Hostesses tab on the far right of the top menu. Choose a date you are available where it shows 1 or 2 openings and click on "View and Sign up". Pam Roberts, Coordinator for Museum hosts/hostesses will monitor that master list and fill spots as needed by phone and email.

Let's all try the new, efficient system. You can sign up, go in again to change your sign up, and also see who else is scheduled when. Many thanks to David Landry, MHS Web Master, for designing this option. Contact Pam at drpamptSCC@charter.net or call or text to 860-428-2406 with any questions.

IN MEMORIAM

Since the publication of our last newsletter, we have lost several of our long-time members. With sorrow we note their passing and acknowledge their contributions to our Society.

- **Jean Manter** (d. November 20, 2014). Jean had been a MHS member since 1988 and always enjoyed hosting at the museum. She served on the board and as newsletter editor from 1998-2000.
- **Ethel Hawkins** (d. January 30, 2015). Ethel and Winthrop Hawkins joined the Society in 1993. Both served on our Acquisitions Committee for many years.
- **Gertrude Lamb** (d. March 15, 2015). Gertrude and Jack Lamb were among the charter members when the Society was founded in 1957. Gertrude was a long-time member of the MHS board and served as President from 1992-1998.

- **Ethel Larkin** (d. April 6, 2015). Ethel and Larry Larkin were also charter members of the Society. Ethel was a member of the Mansfield History Workshop that researched and compiled the first edition of the *Chronology of Mansfield*. She also served as the MHS representative to MONC (Museums of Northeast Connecticut).

We wish to express our appreciation to the family of Ethel Hawkins who directed memorial gifts to the Society. We received numerous gifts in memory of Ethel. In recognition of her work on the Acquisitions Committee, the board has earmarked these funds for future purchases for the museum collection.

A SURPRISE ATTIC FIND JOINS THE COLLECTION



In January the Marcy family had some insulation work done in their attic. After the workers left, Helene Marcy used her phone flashlight to examine their work. She noticed a large black box under the eaves. She thought one of the men had left behind their toolbox but, instead, there was a surprise inside. When she opened the box, she discovered an old alto horn along with two music booklets and many loose sheets of band music, mostly hand-written. “Mansfield Brass Band” was inscribed inside the cover of one booklet. The other was inscribed with the name of the owner, C. G. Cummings. Mystified, the Marcys tracked down the three families who had previously lived in the house, but none knew of the horn’s existence. In February, Helene Marcy donated the horn and music to the Historical Society.

The Horn

Upon receiving the horn, we immediately consulted with David Yutzey, one of our members who is a collector of antique brass instruments. He identified the instrument as an alto saxhorn probably dating from the mid to late 19th century. The horn is made of nickel alloy rather than brass. It has three rotary valves and is pitched in the key of E flat. The

wooden case is original and known as a coffin case due to its shape.

Unfortunately, there are no marks on the horn to indicate when or by whom it was made. However, according to Yutzey, the rotary valves on the horn suggest that it may have been made in Eastern Europe where rotary valves were more commonly used. The saxhorn, as originally invented by Adolphe Sax prior to 1850, had piston valves, like a modern trumpet.

Thanks to the generosity of David Yutzey, the horn was recently restored to playable condition. The work was done by Dick Hansen, a brass-instrument repairman with a shop located in Brimfield, Mass.

The repair work made it possible to determine the exact pitch of the horn by playing it into an instrument tuning meter. The horn is pitched somewhat higher than modern instruments, typical of wind band instruments in the 19th and into the early 20th centuries. By the mid-20th century, most band instruments were tuned lower to make them compatible with the standard of pitch (A = 440) used by symphony orchestras.

The Music

Yutzey also examined the band music contained in the instrument case and offered to catalog it. There are 103 sheets of music, 91 of them handwritten. All contain only the part for the alto saxhorn. Yutzey explained that it was common practice for band members to hand-copy their parts from the printed score held by the band leader.

At least 18 of the pieces were written by Willimantic composer and band leader, Thomas H. Rollinson. One of his pieces, a quick step, is titled “Atwoodville”. More about him follows.

C. G. Cummings & the Mansfield Brass Band

The Marcy’s gift launched a research quest to discover more about C. G. Cummings and the Mansfield Brass Band.

The horn’s owner was most likely Charles G. Cummings who was born in Mansfield in 1844 and died in 1901. He’s buried in the Hillside Cemetery on Spring Hill Road. Articles in the *Willimantic Chronicle* from the 1880s indicate that he lived in Gurleyville. His parents lived in a house, now gone, that was located at the intersection of East Road and Hanks Hill Road. Surprisingly, sometime after Charles Cumming’s death, his widow married Bradley M. Sears and moved into the Victorian farmhouse right next door to our museum. Was the

horn there before finding its way to the Marcy's house?

An article in the *Willimantic Chronicle*, dated March 1, 1882, suggests that Charles Cummings was also a member of the Mansfield Fife and Drum Corps. The event it describes took place in the old Town Hall which is now part of our museum complex. It's hard to imagine a ball being held there!

"The ball given under the auspices of the Mansfield Fife and Drum Corps (the last of the season) at the Town hall last Friday night Feb. 24th, was a grand success and will long remain a memorable affair in the minds of those present. The music furnished by E. Jackson, F. Jackson, F. Bliss, A. Freeman and C. Cummings, was good and all that could be desired. Most if not all of the performers are members of the corps thus showing to the world that they have the talent and can furnish music suitable for most any occasion. The corps consists of fifteen pieces, drums and fifes, and are equal if not superior to any in the state."

Unfortunately little information has been found to date about the Mansfield Brass Band. There is a reference to it in a letter dated April 4, 1843 that was written by Robert Porter Barrows of Mansfield to his brother Lucius Barrows in Cedarville, New Jersey. It mentions a brass band "started in old Mansfield [that] now consists of twenty members." Barrows describes the instruments in the band as follows:

- two ophicylides
- two post Horns
- four clarionettes
- four bugles
- three trombones
- one concert horn
- two valve trumpets
- symbols
- bass drum

Barrows also relates, "I have drummed for them some they are doing the business up about right [and] have been paying some attention to teetotalism here this winter." Teetotalism was an extreme form of the temperance movement that advocated total abstinence from alcoholic beverages.

The only other reference to the band was found in an article in *The Hartford Times*, dated April 13, 1844. It advertises that the Mansfield Brass Band and the Coventry Glee Club were to be the featured entertainment at a fair being held at the Congregational Church in South Coventry. It was a fundraising event for the Nathan Hale Memorial which would be built two years later.

For now it's unknown how long the Mansfield Brass Band existed after the 1840s. No further

references to it have been found. Did it survive past the Civil War? Were its members absorbed by the Mansfield Fife and Drum Corps or other bands in the area? It's a mystery that remains to be solved.

Many thanks to Helene Marcy for donating her surprise attic find. The horn, original case, and music are wonderful additions to our collection.

We are also very grateful to David Yutzey for facilitating and financing the restoration of the horn and his efforts in cataloging the music. He also researched and wrote the following article about Thomas H. Rollinson, the composer of much of the music found in the case.

THOMAS H. ROLLINSON: WILLIMANTIC BANDMASTER AND COMPOSER

Thomas H. Rollinson was the first bandmaster of Willimantic. He was born in Ware, Massachusetts on January 4, 1844 and came with his family to Willimantic, Connecticut in 1853. Rollinson went to Rhode Island to receive his formal musical education, which consisted of training in instrumental music, performance on cornet, piano and organ, and the study of common musical practices in counterpoint, harmony and composition.

It has been estimated that, in his lifetime, Rollinson published hundreds of original compositions, including marches, quicksteps, galops and serenades, dances in several forms including polkas, schottisches and waltzes, and more serious pieces, such as overtures, fantasies and solos and duets for various instruments. Rollinson possessed many musical skills, which he applied to leading performances by brass ensembles early in his career and creating compositions within a number of musical genres until the end of his life.

In 1858, the Willimantic Cornet Band, allegedly the "first brass band in Willimantic," was organized, complete with a constitution and by-laws, that included nineteen articles, and with a board of elected officers representing some of the town's foremost businesses, trades and professional men. Unfortunately, within a few years, the band had to suspend its activities because of the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. The band's operations were not resumed until 1868. After some apparent struggling with determining the legitimacy of some of the memberships and with reestablishing the logistics of operating procedures and policies, Thomas H.

Rollinson was appointed leader of the Willimantic Cornet Band on August 4, 1868.

After some four years as leader of the Willimantic Cornet Band – reportedly without pay – Thomas Rollinson was formally thanked for his leadership by the band at its March 1872 annual meeting. As a token of their appreciation, Rollinson was presented a silver tea set in recognition of his service to the band.

Unfortunately, by 1876 the Willimantic Cornet Band found itself in disarray and apparently headed for extinction. At the March annual meeting in that year, after much debate on the payment of bills, the collection of back dues, and the sale of musical instruments and other property owned by the band, a vote was taken on the details of disbandment. Committees were established, including Rollinson prominently as a member, to appraise the band's property and to assure that members in arrears paid a tax of \$4 in lieu of back dues owed.

In the summer of 1876, a new Willimantic Band was founded with Thomas Rollinson as director. At the same time a National Band of Willimantic had organized with some of its players being taken from the former band at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Willimantic. Competition from the National Band and the departure of Rollinson from the local music scene in the early 1880's, doubtless were factors contributing to the eventual disappearance of the new Willimantic Band.

The exit from Willimantic by Thomas Rollinson was signaled by several events that might today be called "career moves" on his part. He had played solo cornet for one season with the Boston Cadet Band while still a resident of Willimantic. As early as 1879, Rollinson had apparently taken steps to obtain employment in music other than leading the Willimantic Cornet Band. He had joined with A. C. Andrew in running a local music store at 178 Main Street in Willimantic. It was reported, in December of 1879, that Rollinson had accepted a position to lead a band in Mansfield, Ohio, but there is no evidence that he ended up going there. Then, in 1883, Rollinson took the position of director of the Waltham Watch

Company Band, which subsequently under his leadership earned a reputation for its outstanding concert and parade work.

In 1887, Rollinson finally found permanent employment deserving of his musical talents and managerial abilities. He was hired by the Oliver Ditson Company to serve as music arranger and as head of band and orchestra music sales. During the time he was at Ditson, it is estimated that Rollinson composed over 400 original works and made arrangements or otherwise authored approximately 1,500 other musical publications.

Thomas Rollinson died at his home in Massachusetts on June 23, 1928 and was buried in the Mt. Feake Cemetery in Waltham.

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MARK YOUR CALENDAR: Meeting/Program – May 8 Museum Opening – June 7

MANSFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

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