

News-Letter - January 2006

FIRST CHURCH PAPERS INVENTORIED

By Sally Burt

In the year 2000, with the guidance of the former librarian, Peg Bradner, I embarked on a fascinating project: the making of an inventory of the First Church papers held at the Dedham Historical Society. An inventory is a list of all the items in a collection. To accomplish this task I had to read the documents, remove them from their original containers, unfold them, and put them into chronological order and into acid free folders and boxes. For the past five years I have gone through the contents of two tin chests, a filing cabinet, and several miscellaneous boxes, and sorted through thousands of papers large and small: receipts, letters, service leaflets, playbills, architectural drawings, pew seating diagrams, organ pipe specifications, deeds, wills, sermons; in other words, a variety of documents and memorabilia that describe the life of this historic church and its growth from its beginnings in 1638, two years after the founding of Dedham.

Making an inventory of an exhaustive collection items spanning over 300 years of history is work which requires reasonably good eyesight and concentration on the contents. Both traits helped a great deal when I was reading tiny handwritten receipts for payment of services such as the cutting and carting firewood for the meeting house. The pre- Revolutionary war handwriting was what is often called copper plate style, and the payment was in pounds, shillings, and pence.

Among the papers is an address on the history of the church given in 1955 by former deacon, Walter Hodgdon. The First Church gathered in 1638 in its first meeting house with John Allin as pastor. The history of the First Church is inextricably bound to the history of Dedham. All people, "whether church members or not were taxed to support the church."

For 120 years the First Church was the only church in Dedham; the Episcopal Church was not founded until 1758. One of the most well known events in the history of the church is what is termed "The Split." In 1818, a segment of the church body, under the influence of the new, more liberal tradition, Unitarianism, called Alvin Lamson to be minister. According to Hodgdon, "some [Orthodox] members voted not to call him and left the church with Deacon Fales who took parish records, funds and silver with him. Deacons Baker and Richards filed suit, and a trial ensued culminating in the split; those remaining being Unitarian and those leaving forming Allin Church. Over the years, the First Church hosted many community events such as lectures, concerts, and amateur theatricals. A men's social group called the Current Topics Club, which began at the First later became known as the Beefers and included men from other churches. During the influenza epidemic in 1918, the Dedham Board of Health asked for the use of the church vestry for a temporary hospital. The church was glad to be of service to the community, only stipulating that the vestry be returned in sanitary condition. This was duly accomplished through the joint efforts of the Board of Health and the church at a cost of \$436.85.

In addition to the main body of First Church records, the Historical Society was more recently given the Richard Bancroft papers. Bancroft, a well known lawyer and citizen of Dedham, was a deacon of the church from 1965 to 1978, and his collection includes carbon copies of agendas and minutes of parish meetings, and correspondence relating to people and property among which is the taking of church-owned land in Westwood for the construction of Route 128. These papers, along with the main collection of church documents and memorabilia, give an invaluable portrait of the long and rich history of this important Dedham church from 1638 to 1980.

[Many of the records of the Dedham Historical Society are in the archives, and are not readily accessible other than to staff. If you wish to view archival records, it is important to make arrangements with the Librarian/Archivist prior to arriving at the Society. Archival records are generally one-of-a-kind items that require special care and handling.]

LOOKING BACK 200 YEARS

The Needham Historical Society recently published an article written by Robert D. Hall, Jr. (Ye Olde Editor, Needham Historical Society Gazette). What we take for granted today was very different 200 years ago.

Needham, of course, is one of Dedham's children and an adjacent town. What happened there wasn't very different from what happened in Dedham. For that reason, we obtained permission from the NHS to reproduce their article in our *News-Letter*, and hope you enjoy looking back 200 years. It makes one appreciate what we have today.

CONSIDER THE YEAR 1805:

Take **CLOTHES**, for example. Two hundred years ago, the clothes folks wore were made of only five materials: wool, cotton, linen, silk, or leather. Gaps were usually pulled together by buttons or laces and sometimes by sharp-pointed pegs, or buckles or clasps or pins – but not by the speedy and convenient modern velcro fasteners, zippers, snaps, safety pins, or even hooks and eyes we use today.

In those early days, no one wore undergarments to keep coarse and itchy wool outer garments from chafing their bodies; while their shoes pointed straight ahead and could be switched between the right foot and the left, not worn on just one foot and not the other.

If it rained or snowed, early Needhamites had no waterproof raincoats, rubbers, rubber boots, or galoshes. To keep dry, they might have thrown a cape of grease-soaked leather called an oiled-skin over their shoulders. Their leather boots soaked up water as they slogged through Needham's puddles and snow drifts or as they worked and walk in downpours or blizzards and were soaked to their skins.

There were no sunglasses to protect eyes from the bright sun nor earmuffs to keep ears from freezing. Hypothermia, as well as frostbitten noses, hands and feet, were common because of the thin covering offered by leather shoes and by woolen clothes, mufflers, socks and mittens that quickly soaked up moisture and helped drop body temperatures and freeze human extremities.

CLEANLINESS was virtually unknown. Bathing usually consisted of splashing water on the face on arising in the morning. Washing the hair or the rest of the human body usually awaited a warm summer rain or an occasional splash in the Charles River on a hot summer day. Considering the lack of bathing and the average person's close association with farm animals, "B.O." (made famous in the 20th century by Lifebuoy Soap ads) and body lice were commonplace. I suspect that a Needham town meeting in 1805 must have been quite itchy and odiferous as well as noisy and quarrelsome.

Soap was home-made from lye and animal fat and usually used to wash clothes. Lye soap was so caustic that it was not often applied to the human skin.

In 1805, nail clippers didn't exist. When it came to keeping the fingernails and toenails at a reasonable length, trimming was with scissors, knives, or the use of one's teeth.

COMMUNICATION with the world outside Needham was far from being on a daily basis as telegraph, telephone, television, radio, and computer had yet to be invented. Through local gossip, Needham folks heard the daily dish by word of mouth. News from outside Needham came via travelers and visitors and was broadcast through the mouth of the town crier. For those who could read (at least half the population was illiterate), news of the world outside Needham came via out-of-town newspapers. News in the Boston newspapers was often several weeks old, having been carried by post from Philadelphia or New York or Washington, while news from England was well over a month old as it had to come by ship across the Atlantic.

HEALTH MAINTENANCE was always a problem. In 1805, because there were no known cures other than home remedies for such ailments as blood poisoning, small pox, measles, pneumonia, diphtheria, rabies, cholera, and typhoid fever, most were fatal. Diseases and epidemics of various types were widespread. About 25% of Needham children died before the age of two and of those that did survive, a few sometimes reached an extreme old age, whereas the average life expectancy was only 30.

This was a time when doctors did not have today's medical and pharmaceutical technology. The most common treatment for almost every illness was to bleed a patient by cutting a vein and removing several pints of blood in order to drain the disease out of the body in the hope of a cure. Some historians speculate that George Washington's death in 1799 was caused by his veterinarian who bled him profusely to cure him of a cold.

What little dentistry was practiced in Needham in 1805 was probably done by the local barber and must have been quite painful. It wasn't until 1845 that a Boston dentist, Dr. William Morton, used ether on his patients to avoid the pain of tooth extraction. In 1805, little attention was paid to cleaning teeth and at the first sign of severe tooth ache, a family member probably had the local blacksmith pull an offending tooth as the only way to relieve the constant pain and suffering. In 1805, lots of Needham folk were shy a number of teeth and the few who lived beyond 30 usually carried only one or two teeth to the grave.

TRANSPORTATION for most Needhamites was by walking or riding in a wagon or coach. Except for the very wealthy, few men actually rode horseback. Horseback riding was so uncommon hereabouts that at the start of the Civil War in 1861, Massachusetts had to recruit men from California who knew how to ride a horse to form the 1st Massachusetts Cavalry. Farm horses were used to pull wagons and plows and to turn mills. If a Needhamite owned a buggy or a shay, the work horse was used on Sundays to take one's family to church. Otherwise the entire family walked. The motivation behind Needham's break-away from Dedham in 1711 was the long walk from Needham to the church in Dedham and back!

Although the steamboat was invented in 1787, whether traveling on the Charles or across the Atlantic, passengers invariably were carried in boats propelled by oars or sails. It wasn't until 1807 that Fulton's steamboat began carrying passengers over the water. And flights in balloons remained a novelty limited to a few daredevils from the first flight in 1783 until the invention of the airplane in 1903.

AMENITIES we take for granted did not exist in 1805. Houses did not have running water inside. Wells were dug usually near the door closest to the kitchen. Every morning a bucket of water would be cranked up and brought inside for use with the morning cooking or possibly for washing the dinner dishes. Sometimes a wash basin was placed just outside the door and this was filled with water to wash faces. If a homeowner was especially affluent, the well could be equipped with a hand pump to siphon up the water rather than with a bucket on a rope. Hot water was heated in a pot hung in the fireplace.

Indoor bathrooms were non-existent and chamber pots were used at night and outside privies during daylight hours. And, of course, paper was scarce and used only for writing or printing. The Needham Historical Society has a chamber pot but, I assure you, it is used solely for display.

There was no refrigeration except in the winter months, so deep holes in the ground called cold cellars were dug to hold fruits and vegetables that did not easily decay like apples and potatoes. Otherwise, some vegetables were preserved by drying to be reconstituted at a later time, and meats and fish were salted and dried in order to last through a New England winter.

JUST THINK how lucky we are in Needham to have been born in an age so advanced in every technology and in a country literally filled with super-stores offering whatever necessities, benefits and conveniences we might want or need. Not like those Needham folks who lived here in 1805. ☺

NEW LIBRARY ACQUISITIONS

Pointers. Magazine as part of a subscription to Italian genealogical publication. Donation of Carol Sestito and William Sestito.

Conferences and Combination Lectures in the Elizabethan Church. Gift of Reverend Gerard Moate, Vicar and Lecturer of The Parish Church of St. Mary, Dedham, England.

Dedham Parish Church. One booklet and one pamphlet on The Parish Church of St. Mary, Dedham, England. Gift of Reverend Gerard Moate, Vicar and Lecturer of The Parish Church of St. Mary, Dedham, England.

Reflections. Class of 1944. Dedham High School Yearbook. Gift of Mrs. D. Aldous Claffey.

The Complete Historical Record of New England's Stricken Area. Details of the hurricane of 1938. Gift of Mrs. D. Aldous Claffey.

Ancestors of Margery Ruth Howe. Gift of Rogers Bruce Johnson.

The Makers of Trinity Church in the City of Boston. Gift of James Kaufman.

Reflections. Class of 2005. Dedham High School Yearbook. Gift of Steve Dewar, Advisor to Dedham High School Class of 2005.

Unlocking the Secrets in Old Photographs. Purchase.

Reflections. Class of 1933. Dedham High School Yearbook. Gift of Anne Fox.

Reflections. Class of 1949. Dedham High School Yearbook. Gift of Jeanne Palmer.

Commonplace Books of Law: A Selection of Law-Related Notebooks from the Seventeenth Century to the Mid-Twentieth Century. A book that contains material about slavery from Horace Mann's Litchfield Law School Notes. Gift of Paul Pruitt, from the University of Alabama Law School, one of the authors.

The O'Connell Boy: Educating "The Wolf Child," An Irish-American Memoir. Autobiography of Tom O'Connell, a journalist and lecturer who lived with his grandmother in East Dedham during high school and in a foster home in Norwood in his youth.

The Fales Family: The First Ten Generations in America. Genealogical history book. Gift of Mrs. Nancy Roney Khan.

War Diary and Letters of Stephen Minot Weld. 1861-1865. Purchase.

The Great Migration: Immigrants to New England 1634-1635 Volume IV. Purchase.

Touring New England. Gift of Bob Hanson.

Prison Days and Nights. Gift of Bob Hanson.

Dressed for the Photographer. Purchase.

The Peabody Sisters. Mary Peabody Mann was Horace Mann's second wife. Purchase.

Sea Glass by Anita Shreve. Gift of Kathy Brown. Dedham author.

A Directory of Massachusetts Photographers 1839-1900. Purchase.