



Stony Brook **CURRENTS**

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The Newsletter of the Suffield Historical Society

September 2020

The mission of the Suffield Historical Society is to collect, preserve and stimulate interest in the history of Suffield and the region and to actively share it. The Society hopes to inspire a sense of community, as well as to provide an understanding and appreciation of Suffield's past.

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FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK *by Art Sikes*

For most of us, the isolation of the COVID 19 protocols has made it a very long winter, spring, and summer. Among all the closures and cancellations were the SHS 2020 activities and programs these past months. We want to start back up, but resume activities slowly and safely. For this reason, we have not put together a 2020-2021 Program Guide to insert with this newsletter. Our Fall 2020 programs are outlined in this newsletter and, for your safety, will be conducted online.

Our winter newsletter will include the program brochure for the spring and summer programs and activities.

A special 350th Anniversary display for the King House *Suffield Celebrates* has begun, but will not be up this fall.

Our inserted annual renewal notice has an extra section this year. Because our June meeting had to be cancelled, the election of officers and trustees did not take place as usual. The bottom part of the renewal is the ballot, which I ask you to complete and return with your renewal. We were also unable to send out our Annual Appeal for a project at the King House. If you feel left out, however, we ask you to include a donation with your renewal, and we thank you.

Check the label of your newsletter. If it says, "Paid thru Sep 2020," your dues are due now. If it says "Paid thru Sep 2021," you're all set as you paid in advance. If the date is prior to 2020, you didn't pay your dues last year ... join for 2020 now so you won't miss out on our activities, updates, programs, and information for the coming year!

We need your email address for you to receive invitations for our virtual programs this Fall. We do not share it with others and use it only to send out meeting reminders or calendar changes/additions. If you're not getting these notices, we don't have your email address or we have an old one that no longer reaches you. Please update. If no email address, please note that and make sure we have a phone number to reach you with last minute changes to events.

SUFFIELD STORIES

The forthcoming book *Suffield Stories from Another Half Century 1970-2020* includes an essay entitled “Suffield Polonia.” It combines census data, genealogical research, and stories from members of the Suffield Polish Heritage Society (PHS) with previously-written histories of St. Joseph’s Church to describe the evolution of the ethnic community here. The publication was edited by Beth Chafetz for Suffield’s 350th Anniversary.

The Polish community that began in the 1880s grew from 150 male and female immigrants in 1900 to about 1,200 Suffield residents of Eastern European descent (most of whom were from Poland) by 1920. Research demonstrates that many of the initial Poles did not arbitrarily decide to come to Suffield. They were examples of chain migration who chose this town based on the recommendation and support of family and friends.

A few first-generation, but mostly second and third-generation, Polish Americans share family stories at a typical meeting of the PHS. The members tell of the way their “Babcia” and “Dziadek” met and the strong work ethic that those grandparents passed along to future generations. They reminisce of the Sunday church fundraising picnics held in the 1950s, and the multi-day Polka festivals on church grounds in the 70s and 80s.

Due to the covid pandemic, the PHS has not met since March. We look forward to resuming our first-Wednesday-of-the-month meetings when it is safe to do so. In the meantime, whether or not you are a member of the organization but are of Polish descent, you may enjoy learning a little about the evolution of Suffield Polonia.

DID YOU KNOW.....

Did you know that Poland, Maine, and China, Maine, are not named for the countries but for popular hymns written by Suffield hatter and composer, Timothy Swan (1758-1842)? Swan built his house, still standing, just north of the Congregational church and married the daughter of Ebenezer Gay, who was the town’s minister. Hymnals including Swan’s compositions can be found in the library’s archives.

From “Maine Intersection,” by Edgar Allen Brown, *Yankee*, September/October 2020



WORLD WAR II LETTERS

by Barry Sisk

The year 2020 marks the 75th Anniversary of the end of WW II. Four fighter pilots who were stationed at Bradley Army Air Field had a close connection with a Suffield family: John Arthur and Sarah (Sally) Pease Washburn and John’s mother, Alice Washburn. Two of the pilots were probably housed with Alice. The housing for the other two is unknown.

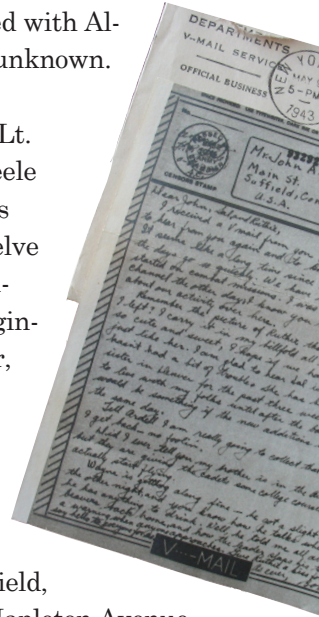
The four pilots, Lt. Wayne Brainard, Lt. Richard J. De Bruin, Lt. Robert J. Steele and Lt. Richard E. Wolff, wrote letters from England to John and Sally. Twelve are still in the possession of the Washburn family. The series of articles, beginning with Lt. Steele in this newsletter, will provide information about each pilot including a copy of one letter.

John and Sally Washburn were in their late twenties in 1942, when the pilots were stationed at Bradley Field, and lived on the southeast corner of Mapleton Avenue and Main Street. Mrs. Alice Washburn, whose husband died in WWI and is buried in France, lived at 21 Bridge Street. “Ruthie”, the daughter of Sally and John, was two years old in 1942.

Lt. Steele was 23 when he married Katherine Grace Love, 20, on July 5, 1942, in Kansas City, Missouri. When Lt. Steele was assigned to Bradley Field, the couple lived in Suffield. Based on letters to the Washburns, dated January, March and May, 1943, Steele and his wife had developed a close relationship with them.

During WWII, the mailing system for overseas military service personnel was V-mail. Accompanying this article is a letter from Lt. Robert J. Steele, dated March 18, 1943, and postmarked Grand Central Annex (one of only two mailing sites that were able to send and received facsimile copies of letters, a process that speeded up mail service.).

Steele was assigned to the 62nd Fighter Squadron, 56th Fighter Group along with Lt. Wayne Brainard. The 62nd was based at Bradley from July to December, 1942. It moved to England in January, 1943. The pilots were flying P-47 Thunder-bolts. The letters from Lt. Steele provide insight into the feelings of servicemen during times of war as well as his connections to



Suffield. In a letter dated January 25, 1943, Monday afternoon, Steele said “ I wrote to your mother and Mrs. Allen the other night and told them we are somewhere in England. I miss Suffield and seeing all of you, and I mean it is hard being away from Grace like this.” Also, he said that he had had a chance to visit many important sites in London guided by “an old gentleman.” He closed this letter with “ Tell everyone hello from Wayne [Lt. Brainard] and me and give Ruthie a kiss from me.”

In a letter dated March 18, 1943, Steele referred to his pregnant wife, Grace, “who is doing well... Would I ever like to be there when the baby is born - damn this war anyway.” He described a story about a pilot, not a religious man, who was in a difficult dogfight. The pilot kept saying “ God help me.” The pilot made it back to his base. Steele closed this letter with “ Say hello to everyone from Wayne and me and give Ruthie a kiss for me. Bob”

A third letter dated May 2, 1943, addressed “ Dear John, Sal, Ruthie,” began with “I received a V-mail from you yesterday...” Evidently the 62nd FS had been training for a number of months because Steele stated “We have been quite busy and have started combat missions. I was on a sweep over the channel the other day. I know you realize I can’t say much about our activity over here.” He referred to his pregnant wife and Sally’s pregnancy and maybe the babies would be born the same day. (Howard Washburn was born July 31 and Pamela Steele was born Aug. 14). He said Grace visited her sister in Denver for three weeks and then was staying with his parents. He said that he carried a photo of Ruthie in his billfold. He closed this letter by stating that “Wayne is getting along fine.”

Lt. Robert J. Steele was shot down over the English Channel on his 23rd mission on July 29, 1943, and became a POW in Holland. He was liberated from a POW camp in Germany in the Spring of 1945 by elements of General Patton’s Third Army. He was repatriated and joined Grace and Pamela Jo, his daughter who was born on August 14, 1943, He died on August 5, 2001, and Catherine Grace Steele died on December 19, 2008.

Barry Sisk is the widower of Ruth Washburn Sisk (“Ruthie”). He was assisted by James Reeves, Trustee of Suffield Historical Society, and Pamela Washburn Berry, sister of Ruth Washburn Sisk, in the research for this article.

KING HOUSE UPDATES



In the August wind storm, one of the big branches from the ash tree at the King House came down. It took out a section of fencing by the back door. Also a large branch from a red maple came down in front of the stable.

A special thanks to Bill O’Brien and Jim Kent who assisted SHS officers and trustees in the cleanup.

But Curator Lester Smith commented that there were also “... a number of people who saw us working and stopped to help. It was heartening.” Thank you, one and all!

Our regular fall cleanup has been scheduled for the morning of November 7, as the museum will be open in October this year with limited hours and restrictions. Please see Upcoming Events on page 4 for those details.



Our newly painted barn at the King House Museum boasts of a beautifully designed plaque with a quilt pattern encircling a primitive-style rendition of our restored Loomis tobacco wagon.

The four-by-four square panel, designed and painted by Bev Sikes, is part of a Barn Quilt Trail planned for Suffield’s 350th Anniversary celebration.

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Like Us on Facebook:
www.facebook.com/SuffieldConnecticutHistory/

King House Museum
232 South Main Street

Open to the Public, Free
Wednesdays and Saturdays
1:00 - 4:00 p.m.
May through September

Newsletter
Maggie Philippon, Editor
Anne Borg, Compiler

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Because of the COVID-19 protocols, our regular museum hours this spring and summer were cancelled. Thus we are planning to open the museum Wednesdays and Saturdays for the month of October. Tours will be given on the hour at 1, 2 and 3 p.m. Groups of no more than 4 can be accommodated. Masks are required.

CLASS SERIES

**Wednesdays, October 13, 20, 27 & November 4
7 to 8 p.m.**

Virtual classes on ZOOM

Dennis Culliton, director of the Witness Stone Project, will hold classes on the subject of colonial slavery in New England and techniques to sustain dialogues about race and equity. Sign up at <bsullivan@suffieldacademy.org> or by calling 860-328-9466. You will receive an ID and a password via email to join the classes.

For those with concern about the technology of Zoom, Trustee Bill Sullivan will conduct how-to sessions on September 30 and October 7, also at 7 p.m. These two sessions are identical and not required if you're familiar with Zoom.

WORK DAY

Saturday, November 7 9 a.m. to noon

King House and grounds

Come in the morning to help with the barn closing and our big burn pile. Raindate will be Saturday, November 14.

SUFFIELD CELEBRATES 200 YEARS

Tuesday, November 17 7 p.m.

Virtual meeting on Zoom

SHS President will present a program which highlights the events, activities and individuals that were part of the 1870 Bicentennial Celebration for the Town of Suffield. The program will include photos of the Suffield men and women who made the festivities happen.

All members will receive emails with ID and password.

HOLIDAYFEST

Our usual December Holidayfest exhibit will not take place this year due to the uncertainty engendered by COVID-19.

2021 PROGRAM CALENDAR

2021 programs and events will be announced in our January newsletter.