



Stony Brook CURRENTS

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The Newsletter of the Suffield Historical Society

September 2022

SUFFIELD IN HISTORY TRIVIA

1. Images on Suffield's early colonial gravestones include flying death heads, winged-cherubs, angel's heads, scythes and...
 - a. Diamonds
 - b. Tea Cups
 - c. Bats



2. Were colonial blacks buried in the Old Center Cemetery which is located behind the First Congregational Church on High Street?



3. Woodlawn Cemetery located on Bridge Street was begun in 1873. It represents a trend in the Victorian era which was...

- a. To bury people on flat land.
- b. More like a landscaped park.
- c. Away from church yards.

Answers on page 4

OLD CENTER CEMETERY

by Jackie Hemond

Many of Suffield's founding families lie in the Old Center Cemetery located behind the First Congregational Church on High Street. The first burials occurred between 1677 and 1683. The cemetery also contains the graves of soldiers from the American Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War and both World Wars.

The view from Meeting House Hill is spectacular and peaceful which belies the chaos of the graveyard itself. Generally, in colonial graveyards, the headstones were arranged to the east, so that the deceased could meet Jesus Christ in his second coming. Instead these stones face every which way.

One of the oldest legible gravestones is John Lawton's who died in 1690 at age 60. Devoid of any decoration as was the custom of the early Puritans, the inscription only bears his name, age and the date of his death. When images appeared on tombstones, such as on Thomas

Hill's (1704-1724), they were hollow-eyed winged skulls, grim reminders of mortality. A few years later, Lt. Joshua Leavitt (1687-1732) has a less severe-looking winged skull and beautifully carved flowers on the sides. Samuel Kent, Esq. died in 1772 at age 74. His stone is more elaborately carved and distinctively shaped. Unlike the commonly rounded stones, his is pointed. His decorative flying image is softer still, as it looks like the man in the moon. Others from this time have images of flying cherubs. In the 1800s, the gravestones were decorated with urns and weeping willows. All types of these stones are represented in the Old Center Cemetery.



A tabletop memorializes the deaths of two brothers, James and Jonathan Bagg, aged 19 and 17, who died on the same day, on May 20, 1766 when they were struck by lightning. The tabletop is an indication of affluence,

since the cost of a tabletop was ten times that of a regular stone. Another tombstone looks like a building. In 1698, Rev. Benjamin Ruggles, only 19, was ordained the minister of the Suffield church. In 1700, he built the first meeting house to be used solely for church services. His

grave marker is a miniature replica of it. On the 150th anniversary of his death in 1858, the parishioners of the First Congregational Church erected a miniature replica of the meeting house over his grave. Ruggles died from food poisoning when he was 32 years old.

Curiously, there are three Irish canal workers buried in the cemetery. Between 1827 and 1829, over 400 Irish immigrant laborers, many with families, came to Windsor Locks to construct a canal bypassing the Enfield Rapids in the Connecticut River. In 1827, a priest was summoned from New York to bury Timothy McMahon, John McMahon and Michael Costello, all from Limerick, who were fatally injured on the canal site. It is a mystery how they came to be buried in a Protestant churchyard where Irish were ill-favored and unwelcome ... and yet, permission was granted.

This is only a brief look at the cemetery. There is so much more to learn about it. Thanks to the late Mary Ann Zak and the Phelps-Hatheway House staff for some of the information in this article.

ZAK FAMILY GRAVES

by Sara Zak

The two pictures with this article demonstrate regulatory and traditional differences between family graves in Suffield versus those in Poland. Suffield graves are marked very simply, with a family monument and individual foot stones. In Poland, however, each tomb has a substantial stone slab and monument. Floral arrangements are sparse in Suffield but relatively abundant in Poland.



John Zak, my paternal grandfather, was living on East Street when he died in 1948. He was buried in St. Mary's Cemetery in Poquonock because Suffield did not have a Catholic cemetery until 1953, when the Kozikowski family donated land on Hill Street for St. Joseph Cemetery. "Dziadek" was eventually re-interred in the Zak Family plot on Hill Street. Other family members are now buried in the plot originally intended for ten graves. Recent changes in Catholic laws allow remains of ten additional family members to be buried within the area above each coffin.

St. Joseph Cemetery is plain compared to the graveyard of my Polish ancestors. Many families here keep a small bed or pot of flowers at the headstone or place a special arrangement at Christmas. The VFW proudly marks the graves of veterans with geraniums and a flag. In Poland, however, it is common for descendants to visit the graves of their ancestors several times a year to say prayers and leave tributes. All Saints Day, Nov. 1, is possibly the most important of these days. It is a Holy Day of Obligation for Catholics but just "another day at the office" for most Suffield residents. In Poland, it is a bank holiday that is considered a solemn occasion for the extended family to honor their dead. It allows all to gather in cemeteries with flowers and candles. The custom has been preserved in New Britain, CT, but it is one of many cultural traditions that has not continued in Suffield.

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John P. Smith, the baggage master of the Mountain Road Depot and the owner of the Smith Hotel, died two months after the 1899 Suffield train crash reported in our last issue. He's buried with his wife, Margaret Endress in Woodlawn Cemetery. Left: Tree-stump stones were part of a movement to turn the focus of death back to life at the turn of the 20th century. BUT ... Not all graves are in cemeteries. Right: There is one marked by a brownstone marker and footstone on River Blvd.

This is the final resting place of Richard Austin, who died of smallpox at the age of 61 in 1761. He was a farmer, who with his wife Elizabeth, had 8 children. It was not unusual for people with smallpox to be buried in isolated places because of the fear of spreading the disease.

The gravesite is north of what was once a ferry crossing and may have been property owned by the Austin family.





Left: Sometimes pets have gravestones. “Honey,” was evidently one of Helena Spencer’s favorite pointers, bred at Mrs. Spencer’s Pohala Kennel, which occupied part of her old, green stable at our museum. SHS was given this flush gravestone when a later owner of the cook’s house behind the Spencers’ Pohala home on Kent Avenue found a pile of stones dug up from his side yard. Right: “The Paint” was one of the Spencers’ last two horses, whose flush grave-stones still lie behind the museum’s display barn.



PRESIDENT’S REPORT *by Art Sikes*

Thanks to the hard work of Lester Smith and Christine Ritok, we continue to better understand our collection. They are verifying that each object in the collection has a number, description and history in our digital database. This work helps us to make decisions about what to display, what to accept into the collection, what to eliminate and how to define our priorities.

Our list of Officers and Trustees is changing. Ed Chase, our long-time Trustee and President, has a new position: Trustee Emeritus. Thanks, Ed, for all your years of service! Treasurer Rick Seaman is relinquishing his position to Joe Artioli, an enthusiastic supporter of the Society, at the end of August. Laurie Tavino, our resident artist, also stepped down and is replaced by Justin Drenzek, who brings with him an interest in American Polish history. Lastly, Wendy Taylor comes to us brimming with local history and genealogy knowledge. I hope over the next few meetings you will get to meet and welcome the new officers and trustees.

We need new docents to act as tour guides to show off our collection and tell stories about the house and the King family. We are open 1 to 4 p.m. Wednesday and Saturday May to September. We’d love to train you to be a docent. Or consider joining our dedicated group that helps out on Wednesday mornings. Jan and Anne and others do mostly small jobs in and out of the house (sweeping, dusting, weeding and repairing). New volunteers are always welcome.

Finally, we are still collecting items for the time capsule! Bring any additional items to the King Museum or to a fall meeting.

Contact us via email at SHSquestions@gmail.com or phone at 860-668-5256 or visit us on Wednesday morning or afternoon and Saturday afternoons.

CURATOR’S REPORT *by Lester Smith*

Clearly the most important event to report is the arrival of our new associate curator, Christine Ritok, admirably experienced and knowledgeable. We’ve been working together for over three months, mostly weekends, and it’s been a great experience for me. Christine, mostly beavering away bringing our catalog into our new Past Perfect digital system, often asks me to clarify or elaborate a cryptic notation on one of the old 3-by-5 cards, and, importantly, she’s reporting when proper labels are needed on the objects themselves. As our first professional employee, she is rapidly soaking up information about our collection and recommending improvements.

Christine brings extensive knowledge about furniture and is impressed with our great collection of items with local connections, a heritage of our principal donors, Samuel and Helena Spencer. With Christine’s help, our trustees approved the purchase of a Hepplewhite card table, a perfect match to the one acquired from Tom Deupree almost 40 years ago. The two pieces made by Suffield cabinetmaker John Leavitt are now a great feature in the dining room.

And as this report is being written, we expect the delivery later in August of a tall “butler’s desk,” acquired in about 1800 by Dr. Asaph Bissell. This piece has never left South Main Street. It is the generous gift of Carolyn Bissell d’Otreppe. She and her husband Etienne d’Otreppe have moved directly across South Main Street.

Bob Stewart’s colorful exhibit of decorative arts has drawn visitors, and I’m most happy to report that the McAlister fourth grades returned in June.

I must also report that our drastic need for space worsens, making it difficult to respond well to the addition of an important staff member and the use and development of our Past Perfect system.

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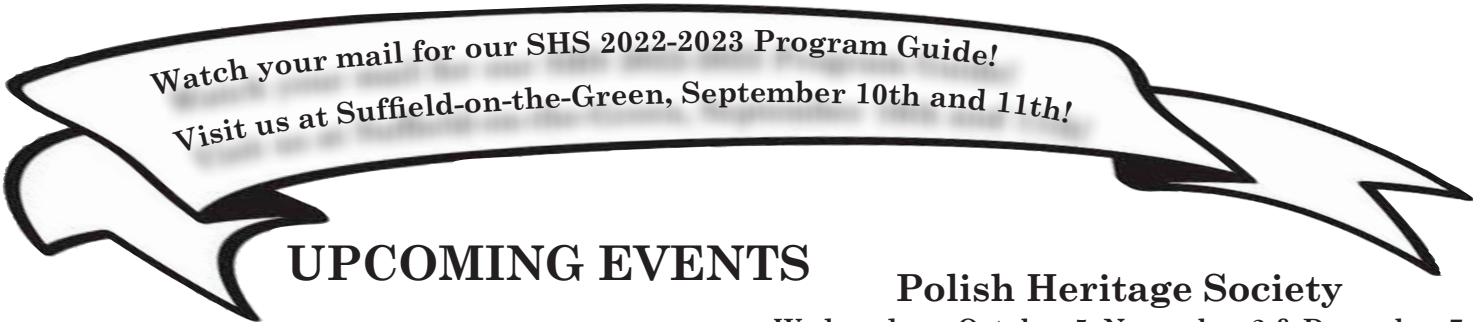
King House Museum
232 South Main Street

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

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Watch your mail for our SHS 2022-2023 Program Guide!
Visit us at Suffield-on-the-Green, September 10th and 11th!

UPCOMING EVENTS

Treasures of an Extraordinary Collector

Foreign and domestic paintings, carvings,
inlaid art, furnishings and more!

Through the friendship with our new associate curator,
we have been allowed to exhibit selections from a private
collector in the local region who insists on anonymity.

*Christine and Lester plan for the new exhibit
to open for the holidays and continue
through next year's regular season.*

Polish Heritage Society

Wednesdays, October 5, November 2 & December 7
10:00 a.m. Suffield Ambulance Center

*The PHS will resume its monthly meetings on the first
Mondays of the month, beginning in October.*

TRIVIA ANSWERS: 1.c., 2. yes, 3.b. and c.

NOTE: 1. There are several examples of gravestones in the Old Center Cemetery by "The Bat" carver, a local craftsman, whose name is unknown. It is amazing that his work survives because he used poor quality shale or sandstone. 2. Colonial blacks were buried in the northwest corner of the cemetery without any markers. 3. In earlier colonial times, cemeteries were meant to remind people of their mortality. By the Victorian times, cemeteries became places of peace and repose. Many Victorians would picnic among the graves. There was also less concern about which church the dead came from.

SHS Officers: Arthur Sikes, Jr., *President*; Jackie Hemond, *Vice President*; Joe Artioli, *Treasurer*; Jan Peake, *Secretary*; Lester Smith, *Historian & Curator*; Christine Ritok, *Associate Curator*. **Trustees:** Anne Borg, Christopher Childs, Justin Drenzek, Nancy Noble, Norman Noble, James Reeves, Dianne Seaman, Robert Stewart, William Sullivan, Wendy Taylor, Jennifer Yergeau, and Sara Zak Ed Chase, *Trustee Emeritus*