



Stony Brook **CURRENTS**

Vol. XVIII, No. 2

The Newsletter of the Suffield Historical Society

May 2023

KING HOUSE SUMMER EXHIBIT



Our summer exhibit at the King House, mounted by Norm Noble and Christine Ritok, will feature Suffield's cigar tobacco agriculture.

It was not too long ago that tobacco was the dominant crop in town – both broadleaf and shade-grown tobacco. Production of tobacco peaked in the 1930s but was still going strong in the 1960s. Throughout the town there were acres of tobacco: shade-grown under the distinctive white tobacco cloths and broadleaf tobacco stalks standing tall under the summer sun.

Many Suffield kids and families have worked the fields, harvested the plants and hung the leaves in the sheds. Today, shade-grown tobacco in this area has declined but broadleaf farming continues to thrive. In August and September, one can still get stuck behind a tractor hauling freshly cut leaves of tobacco. Tobacco sheds still exude the aroma of the drying leaves.

The exhibit will feature a video of tobacco farming in the 1960s as well as documents, tools, stories, photos and mementos.

RICHMOND HILL

by Christine Ritok

The King House Museum and the collection of the Society are full of interesting stories. A personal favorite is the story of the overmantel painting in the dining room, *A View of Richmond Hill*. The oil on board painting is the second version that has hung in this location. The original, painted around 1790, was destroyed in the December 1983 fire. It was likely painted by Carlos King (1769-1843), son of Alexander King (1737-1802), for whom the King House was built in 1764.

Carlos is known to have trained with painter Isaac Sanford in Hartford in 1789. A portrait of composer Timothy Swan (1758-1842) painted around 1797, in the collection of the American Antiquarian Society, is attributed to Carlos King because of its similarities to the original overmantel painting at the King House.

The painting was adapted from an English print first published in 1749. Richmond Hill, a few miles west of London, was a popular subject for artists in the 18th century because of its picturesque location on the Thames River. During the reconstruction of the King House, Curator Lester Smith sought a painter to reproduce the original overmantel painting, which fortuitously had been extensively photographed in the summer of 1983.



Former Curator Bob Gunshanan read about Robert Lawrence Trotter (b. 1954), a notorious forger of early American folk art paintings, who had recently received media attention due to his arrest for fraud after his forgeries were identified. Gunshanan urged Lester to write to the judge to ask if

Trotter could paint a reproduction as part of his sentence. While the judge declined the request, Lester, having noted Trotter's skill, astutely asked that he reproduce the overmantel painting. In 1991, Trotter, true to form, produced a remarkable painting, virtually identical to the original.

WHAT IS A HISTORICAL SOCIETY?

by Art Sikes

In our case, it's location specific for the town of Suffield. What is our purpose, and how do we accomplish this goal? Our mission in part is to "Collect, preserve and stimulate interest in the history of Suffield." How do we accomplish this goal?

We collect lots of things, but not all of them are tangible. We collect objects that define Suffield's history – if they are from Suffield, reside in Suffield, were built in Suffield, written in Suffield, etc... The largest object in our collection is the King House itself. It resides in Suffield, was built by a Suffield resident, and was lived in by Dr Alexander King, an important historical Suffield person. The house helps to define the character of Suffield, especially in the time surrounding the American Revolutionary War.

Over 6,000 objects have been entered into the Society's electronic database. There are many more to be cataloged. Most objects were donated to the museum, some were purchased to fill a gap in the collection. But how many copies of a Suffield postcard do we need? Perhaps several. The Society collects postcards not only for the Suffield picture on the front but also for the message on the back. The messages lead us to possible stories such as: what's going on in town, information on the sender, is the sender a former resident of Suffield? Stories are an example of the non-tangible items we collect: stories about people, families, farms, businesses, churches, organization, etc...

The Society can't accept everything from everybody, but we also don't want to miss out on something that could tell us about Suffield's past. We have collection rules, but they are somewhat flexible. In the next issue, I will talk about "Preservation".

DAR PROJECT BEGINS

The Sibbil Dwight Kent Chapter of the DAR kicked off a project at Old Center Cemetery on April 8. The chapter, with the approval of the First School Society, will be focusing on: updating documentation and mapping, photographing, getting GPS coordinates of each stone, correcting or obtaining proper military gravesite identification, and gravestone restoration.

SUMMER DAYS

by Wendy Taylor

In the summers, when I was home from college, I'd work at the Kent Memorial Library. One of my favorite parts of working summers was the bookmobile! The predecessor of the pop-up library, we did not have a laptop or a hotspot, just paper and pen on which we wrote down barcode numbers.

We piled books into large L. L. Bean bags, lugging them in and out of Elizabeth Mehan's station wagon. Several people around West Suffield let us spread the books out on their lawn for a bit while families walked over to pick out books. In this photo, Elizabeth is in the middle, Ruth Wissemann, on the left, was a reference librarian at KML, and Gene Biggio was the director. Elizabeth kindly donated her time and her car!



THANK-YOUS

SHS is grateful for the dedication of our long-time docents and welcomes our new docents. Without your help our King House collections could not be appreciated. Thank you both. Thank-yous are also extended to members for their help in our Spring cleanup.

Special recognition is given to Norm and Sean Noble for the efforts in maintenance work at the museum and Scott Willett for his trash pick-up.

Thank-yous are in order as well for member Bill Sullivan and his American Studies students at Suffield Academy. They researched the life and agency of Tamer Smith (AKA Tamar Smith) who was enslaved by Comfort Smith and Luther Loomis from the 1770s until Solomon Smith purchased her freedom for marriage in 1798. A Witness Stone honoring her life was installed on April 10, 2023, as a culmination of their research.

SUMMER CHURCH PICNICS

by Sara Zak & James Turek

Every Sunday in the summers from 1948 to 1960, the smell of fried onions and polka music filled the air on South Stone Street. It was coming from property provided by Steve Beneski where people, mostly of Polish descent, dressed in their Sunday best, gathered to socialize, eat, drink, play bingo, and dance at the fund-raising picnics organized by St. Joseph Church.



The picnics were to make money to replace the original church (a converted barn) with the brick building that stands today on South Main Street. The parishioners were divided into teams of about 50 men and women. Each team had a captain and workers to man the attendance gate, serve food and beverages (2 to 9 p.m.) and run the bingo games (3:30 to 8 p.m.) Admission was 25 cents for adults. Children were free. Hamburgers and hotdogs were 30 cents; beer was 30 cents; soda and ice cream were 10 cents. Various orchestras were hired to play music from 3 to 10 p.m.

After a week of toiling in the hot summer fields, for many of those assigned to work the picnic that day, Sundays started early and ran late. For example, Paul Hymniewicz and his sons

would fuel the generator and get it running after the 6:30 a.m. Mass. The refrigerators would be stocked with food from Paczosa's market, as well as ice cream and beverages. The ladies would gather after Mass to peel and slice as many as 300 pounds of onions. The men would collect that day's bingo prizes from the convent and set them up in the game area. The nights ran long for those who closed up and returned the money and remaining bingo prizes to the convent. Some of the ladies returned Monday morning to clean the grills.

These picnics were notable for several reasons. For example, St. Joseph Church was the first organization in Connecticut to hold such fund-raising events. At first, the events attracted about 600 people. Toward the end, crowds of about 3,000 from all over Connecticut and Massachusetts were not unusual. Their profitability

was enhanced when a law that prohibited serving beer to the public on Sunday was changed in 1948. At the last party in 1960, admission was still a quarter. The picnics netted over \$200,000 over the 12-year run and almost covered the cost of the new church dedicated in November 1952.

Those summer polka fests were before my time, but I can easily imagine the aroma of the onions frying in shortening and the sound of the Whoopie Shoopie music. I can still sense the community spirit of the Polish congregation that welcomed guests with a sign that read, "Leave All Your Troubles Behind All Who Enter Here." (Maybe that greeting reflected their sentiment upon arrival in the United States.) They were a hard-working generation, proud of their ethnic heritage and contribution to their Church.



Scenes from the St. Joseph's picnic grounds on South Stone Street during its hay days of fundraising. Can you help the Society identify the couples enjoying a Sunday afternoon at the grounds?

Suffield Historical Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 893
Suffield, Connecticut 06078
(860) 668-5256

Our Website:
www.SuffieldHistoricalSociety.org

Contact Us:
SHSQuestion@gmail.com

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
Dianne Seaman, Compiler
Jackie Hemond, Compiler

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 118
WATERBURY, CT

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

UPCOMING EVENTS

King House Summer Exhibit
Wednesdays & Saturdays
May through September
1:00-4:00 p.m. King House Museum

*Suffield's boom crop in the 20th century.
An exhibit of the tobacco industry in
Suffield: its tools and its people in Suffield.
See related story on page 1.*

Windows of Suffield
Wednesday, May 17, 2023
Suffield Senior Center & via Zoom 7:00 p.m.

*Using the historic photographs from Delphina Clark's
collection, Art Sikes, Jr., will explore Suffield history and
architecture through its historic windows.
Join us to explore innovative and interesting
designs of Suffield's past.*

Changes in Suffield, 1900 to 1920
Wednesday, June 14, 2023
Suffield Senior Center & via Zoom 7:00 p.m.

*Sara Zak, author of Suffield Polonia:
Stories from Another Half-Century,
will discuss the impact of the Industrial Age
and immigration in Suffield.
If there are any particular areas that you would like
explored, contact Sara at suffieldpolams@gmail.com.*

Ice Cream Social
Tuesday, July 11
5:30 - 7:30 pm King House Museum
Raindate: Thursday, July 13
*Bring friends and family, pack a picnic and lawn chairs
to enjoy an old-fashioned ice cream social.
Ice Cream and entertainment provided by SHS.
You supply your appetite for ice cream and fun!*

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*