
GROTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

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ROCK MAPLE BALLROOM

Groton, Vermont in the 1930's



1938 Hurricane damage

2017 OFFICERS

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I want to jot down some notes about the Rock Maple Ballroom in Groton during the 1930's before they fade from memory. The Ballroom was located in the field at the junction of U. S. Highway 302 and Fred Hayes road in Groton, where Northeastern Log Homes is located today. There was a single row of mature Sugar Maple trees along both roads. They were known locally as "Rock Maple" presumably because the wood was harder than usual due to the minerals picked up from the soil there. The history of Groton would not be complete without a story about the Rock Maple Ballroom.

The building was erected in the late 1920's by the Wells River Valley Fair Association to house fair exhibits of arts, crafts, fruits, vegetables, etc. The Wells River Valley Fair Association was incorporated to continue the annual fairs when, Groton Grange #443 Patrons of Husbandry

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discontinued the Grange Fairs. I remember as a young boy delivering flyers, printed by Charles Lord in his shop underneath the Post Office building that George Millis built after the Coffrin Block burned in 1925, where the Post Office had previously been located. We delivered flyers announcing the fair to businesses and homes in Groton, Ryegate, Boltonville, and Wells River - the whole Wells River Valley, from its headwaters in Groton to entering the Connecticut River in Wells River, VT.

Each fall the fair was an exciting time in Groton. There was a children's parade on the fairgrounds with children in costumes, decorated bicycles, scooters, carts, and pets. Floats were decorated and paraded from the fairgrounds east on highway 302 through the village to the Square Front Garage at the east end of the village just beyond the Baptist Church. One year, I remember they had a "Slow Race" with automobiles, from the Fairgrounds to the Square Front Garage. Race officials along the route disqualified any vehicle that stopped, so they had to keep moving and the last one that reached the finish line without stopping won the race.

On the fairgrounds they had lots of events. One I remember was a greased pig that contestants tried to catch and hold to win. There was a greased pole with a five dollar bill (a lot of money during the depression) tacked on the top for the successful climber to win. Several years there was a hot air balloon demonstration where the balloon was inflated with a bonfire and the balloonist ascended a thousand feet or so then parachuted back to earth to thrill the crowd. Most years there was a baseball game in the afternoon and fireworks at night followed by a dance in the later years at floral hall. Lunches were served in the house on the fairgrounds where James Buchanan lived. (Later Douglas and Josephine French lived in this house.) I think James was kind of a superintendent of the fairgrounds. There were lots of games to try and win a prize, but mostly to get your pennies and nickels. McLure's Student Band of Groton Vermont led the parades, played a concert in the bandstand on the fairgrounds, and demonstrated their marching skills.

During the depression money was very scarce, and the fair was not paying its way, so the Wells River Valley Fair Association remodeled the exhibit hall into a ballroom to hold dances for the community, and especially the boys living in the CCC camps at Groton State Forest, to raise money for sponsoring the fairs. The 1930's was also during the Big Bands period and dancing was very popular, with dances in many towns each week and occasionally in schools. A maple (probably rock maple) dance floor was installed in the exhibit hall. The flooring was laid in a circular pattern so dancers could move with the grain of the wood gliding around the ballroom floor. An orchestra stage, lunchroom, coatroom, and chemical restrooms, were added.

My Mother was in charge of the lunchroom for several years with the help of Erma Graham and Gladys Olson, who operated a restaurant in town at the time. My Dad was a water witch who located veins of water with a crotched apple branch so he located a place to put in a driven shallow well for water in the kitchen. The few times I was allowed to go to a dance, I remember how good the steamed hot dogs tasted with ketchup and relish.

A rotating crystal ball built by Carroll Ricker was installed in the center of the ceiling. It was about two feet in diameter covered with small 2x2 inch mirrors that reflected different colored spotlights from each corner of the dance floor. Spots of colored light moved across the ceiling, walls, and floor entertaining the dancing couples for the foxtrots, polkas, and waltzes played by the various orchestras and dance bands that performed there. When square-dances were played the crystal ball was usually not used. I remember some of the dance bands were Henry Ashford's, Lester Freer's, and Dave Whites.

Prohibition ended when the 21st amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1933, but Groton voted to stay "dry" so alcoholic beverages were not allowed in the dance hall or on the grounds. One of the constables hired to control drinking was Elmer Frost, but many dancers kept it in their cars and made occasional trips outside for fresh air and a drink. The

local WCTU (Women's Christian Temperance Union) opposed the dances because of the drinking, but the dances continued.

Cornmeal was sprinkled on the floor to improve the footwork of the dancers as they glided around the dance floor. I remember this because I used to help my Dad clean the floors and restrooms after the dances, an unpleasant task I never liked. We dug holes in the gravel pit behind the dance hall to bury the contents of the five gallon pails used in the chemical toilets. And the chemicals were never strong enough to neutralize the odor.

The building was also used for roller-skating after some lengthy debates over whether or not it would wreck the floor for dancing. But roller-skating was never as popular here as at Pineland in Boltonville. This was the era when roller-skates were clamped on your street shoes.

Groton High School used the ball field for our home baseball games when I was in high school. Home plate was at the junction of the two roads and the dance-hall was deep in center field. It was a sure home run if you could hit the building.

Groton Grange #443 and the Juvenile Grange used the hall for their meetings. It was also used for other occasions before World War II broke out on December 7, 1941. Young men from the CCC camps as well as the locals enlisted or were drafted, and many food items and gasoline were rationed, so dances were discontinued and the townspeople were involved in the War effort.

The property was sold to John French and he converted the Dance Hall into a bobbin mill. I worked at the bobbin mill for a short time in the early 1940's bringing chunks of maple from the bolter saw to the three guillotine splitters. I don't believe any of the splitter operators, who worked there when I did, had all their fingers. I remember people telling how Clarence Williams had lost an eye when one of the teeth flew off the bolter saw. Mills were even more hazardous then than they are today.

Rock Maple Ballroom which had been converted into a Bobbin Mill burned in 1947 and a new Bobbin Mill was built on the site the same year.

Willard Benzie

GHS ON THE WEB

The Groton Historical Society web page is easy to find at grotonvthistory.org. Check it out for minutes of the meetings, general information about the Society, news about current activities, how to contact the Society, and an archive of past newsletters from the first issue in the summer of 1988 to the present.

There are Groton Photos posted in several categories: Business, Groton High School Graduation, People, Post Cards, School, Sports, Town, Harbeson collection, Jesse Heath Powder Horn, and Blakeman collection. If you have pictures of Groton to share you can send them to the Society at grotonvthistory@gmail.com for posting on the webpage.

Historical resources that can be found on the webpage include Groton census records from 1790 to 1930 (note the 1940 census is available on the internet but is not yet posted on our webpage).

Family Records are posted of those in the 1790 census: **Abbott, Bailey, Darling** (including John's son, Robards and son-in-law Timothy **Townshend** families), **Hosmer, James**, and **Morse** New families in the 1800 census that have been added are **Alexander, Batchelder, Emery, Frost, and Gary**. Others will be added soon.

Veterans lists include the War of 1812, Civil War, Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, Korean Conflict, and Vietnam War. Cemetery listings for the old and new village cemeteries, Groton/Peacham cemetery, West Groton cemetery, Darling cemetery, and family burial grounds of Frost, Gray, Heath, McLaughlin, Renfrew and Whitcher can also be found on the Groton Historical Society web page.

And don't forget to visit the GHS page on social media: [Facebook@grotonvthistory](https://www.facebook.com/grotonvthistory) for all the latest information.

REMEMBERING THIRTY-EIGHT

Extensive damages from the recent hurricanes “Harvey” and “Irma” are stark reminders to those in their 80’s and beyond of the hurricane that hit Groton in the afternoon of September 21, 1938. This was before hurricanes were named so it is often just referred to as “Thirty-eight” or sometimes the “Long Island Express” as it first made landfall on Long Island, New York as a category 3 storm before its second landfall near Bridgeport, Connecticut also a category 3 and then heading north through Massachusetts and Vermont as a category 2 on its way to Quebec and Ontario as a tropical storm where it dissipated overnight.

Unlike Harvey, which lingered over Texas for many days, and Irma that traversed the length of Florida at 8 to 12 mph, the Long Island Express was moving rapidly over the warm Atlantic reaching 70 mph which enabled it to speed north over the warm Gulf Stream with minimum losses of power. It was still moving at 47 mph when it made landfall about 2:30 pm in NY and 3:00 pm in CT. It first reached Groton, VT around 4:30 pm although the eye of the storm, with calm conditions, was reported in Dorset, VT about 6 pm. Many trees went down on Railroad Street which was blocked for several days. Only five people were reported killed in Vermont, but where the storm hit earlier in the day there was little or no advance warnings and losses were high.

Over 35% of New England's total forest area was affected. In all, over 2.7 billion board feet of trees fell because of the storm, although 1.6 billion board feet of the trees were salvaged. The Northeastern Timber Salvage Administration (NETSA) was established to deal with the extreme fire hazard that the fallen timber had created. In many locations, roads from the fallen tree removal were visible decades later, and some became trails still used today.

According to *history.com* more than 700 people were killed and another 700 were injured, nearly 9,000 homes and buildings were destroyed and 15,000 damaged, about 3,000 ships were sunk or wrecked, power lines were down causing widespread blackouts and many roads and Railroads were seriously damaged. Total damages were \$306 million, equal to \$18 billion in today’s dollars.

Stephen Long of Corinth, VT wrote a book last year about the hurricane of thirty-eight. Here is a review of his book.

"Thirty-Eight: The Hurricane That Transformed New England" was published by Yale University Press in 2016 and tells about the only time in recorded history that a Category 2 hurricane has reached Vermont. Flooding from "Thirty-Eight" was comparable to that of Tropical Storm Irene in 2011, but it also tore up the landscape with winds exceeding 100 mph.

The hurricane that pummeled the northeastern United States on September 21, 1938, was New England's most damaging weather event ever. To call it "New England's Katrina" might be to understate its power. Without warning, the storm plowed into Long Island and New England, killing hundreds of people and destroying roads, bridges, dams, and buildings that stood in its path. Not yet spent, the hurricane then raced inland, maintaining high winds into Vermont and New Hampshire and uprooting millions of acres of forest. This book is the first to investigate how the hurricane of '38 transformed New England, bringing about social and ecological changes that can still be observed these many decades later.

The hurricane's impact was erratic—some swaths of forest were destroyed while others nearby remained unscathed; some stricken forests retain their pre-hurricane character, others have been transformed. Stephen Long explores these contradictions, drawing on survivors' vivid memories of the storm and its aftermath and on his own familiarity with New England's forests, where he discovers clues to the storm's legacies even now. *Thirty-Eight* is a gripping story of a singularly destructive hurricane. It also provides important and insightful information on how best to prepare for the inevitable next great storm.

Stephen Long is co-founder and former editor of Northern Woodlands magazine and author of More Than a Woodlot: Getting the Most from Your Family Forest. For more than twenty-five years he has been writing about the forests and people of New England. He lives in Corinth, Vermont, with his wife, novelist Mary Hays.

SOME PAST GROTON PLACES



Square-Front Garage where Page Chains were manufactured in the '30s



Smith's Store that was located between Carpenter's Shell gas station and Molly Falls Telephone central office, later the Atlantic gas station was here and now it is the location of Veterans Park.



Welch's Groton Hotel now the site of Groton Post Office



Groton Village School was located where the Fire Station is now.

STORY OF BRISTOL BILL by David Richardson (1832-1898)

David Nelson Richardson of Orange, VT married Janette Darling of Groton in 1858. They moved to Davenport, IA where he was owner and editor of the Davenport Daily Democrat; Regent of Iowa St. University; and advisor of President Grover Cleveland. In 1895 he purchased the hill north of Groton village, named it Mt Medad (for Medad Welch a former owner) and built the first summer home in Groton. In one of his letters home he wrote about "Bristol Bill" which was published in the Caledonia Record.

The only great excitement I ever heard of in Groton was the magnificent counterfeit money scheme that was organized for this location in 1848. It was the biggest thing of the sort I ever heard of—would have been worthy of a much larger place—Washington for instance. For some good reasons, I cannot relate the minute details of the affair, but it will do in the rough.

"Bristol Bill" was one of the most notorious burglars that England ever produced, and he came over to curse America. Christian Meadows was a most ingenious banknote engraver in the employ of the American Banknote Engraving Co., of Boston. Ephraim Low was a Groton merchant, none too honest. Low had somewhere fallen in with Bristol Bill, and Meadows was induced to leave his employers after first stealing some thirty to forty genuine bank note dies, which he was successful in getting away with. Now these dies were the genuine engraving of the principal features of a large share of the banknote circulation of the country. Bank bills made from these would be in a mechanical sense, strictly genuine, except as to the usual autograph-signatures of the bank officers. In the possession of dishonest men they were the most dangerous agents imaginable to the financial condition of the country. Public safety in money matters, and the reputation of the engraving company, as well, demanded apprehension of the thief and recovery of the stolen dies. Energetic steps were at once taken to that effect. The police authorities of the entire country were notified, large rewards offered, and sharp scented detectives had their sharp eyes and sharp wits constantly at work. To write up the history of the event in detail—the search of years, the arrest, the *denouement*, and the trial would require the space of a large volume.

Bristol Bill and Meadows were hunted down. They were found with their several accomplices in and near this village in the winter of 1849-50, the dies recovered. Likewise a heavy transfer press used by engravers to imprint the engraving on the round dies upon the plates of soft stuff from which the bank notes are printed, also a bank note printing press, together with plates ready for the press; likewise a large account of burglars tools of every description. That these counterfeiters might issue money with genuine signatures as well as mechanically genuine printing, they had secured from the bank at Danville a package of one thousand dollars in one dollar bills. By a process known to these experts in villainy the denominational engraving to be removed by chemical process, and higher denominational value printed instead; transforming the original one dollar note into a ten, a fifty, a hundred or any other number that suited. Upon the market, and scarcely in the hands of the signers of these bills, could the fraud be detected. The paper, the printing, the signatures would be genuine; the one dollar bill mentioned had never been in circulation—hence no difference in printing could be detected. But just in the nick of time, before any bill had been raised or any printing done, the parties were all arrested and imprisoned. Two accomplices, then residents of this place, but whose names I have omitted, turned state's evidence—the whole affair from beginning to end was brought to light—how the game had been worked up, how the dies had been shipped to Low's store in axe boxes, how the transfer and printing paraphernalia had been smuggled into town by various ways, how the new building opposite to Low's store, with a deep sub-cellar and under ground culvert to the cellar of Low's store had been nearly completed for a counterfeiting den; how one party and another had been roped in for various reasons—and the whole matter of former suspicions fully explained. Bill and Meadows went to the penitentiary for long terms; Low died in Danville just before trial; one of the state witnesses is dead; the other is still living. It was an incident in the annals of crime that will never be forgotten in Groton—one that is rarely ever mentioned without a shudder of thrilling interest.

1952 COST OF LIVING

LIVING

New House	\$9,075.00
Average Income	\$3,850.00 per year
New Car	\$1,754.00
Average Rent	\$80.00 per month
Tuition to Harvard University	\$600.00 per year
Movie Ticket	.70¢ each
Gasoline	.20¢ per gallon
United States Postage Stamp	.3¢ each

FOOD

Granulated Sugar	.85¢ for 10 pounds
Vitamin D Milk	.97¢ per gallon
Ground Coffee	.74¢ per pound
Bacon	.54¢ per pound
Eggs	.25¢ per dozen
Fresh Ground Hamburger	.53¢ per pound
Fresh Baked Bread	.16¢ per loaf

BACK TO THE FUTURE: LEARNING FROM THE PAST

There are increasing references in popular and scientific literature to an emerging "bio-economy." But what is meant by this term, and what does it imply for the near and longer term future? Part of the answer is revealed by the past.

From the beginning of European settlement of North America through the beginning of the 20th century, citizens relied heavily on wood and agricultural crops to provide food, shelter, energy, transportation, clothing, and other products of all kinds. In other words, the economy was based on materials and products made from once living things (i.e. biomaterials). Over time, society increasingly turned to metals for production of vehicles and ships, and to steel and concrete for construction of buildings of commerce. Similarly, fossil-fuel-based fibers such as nylon, polyester, and acrylic replaced natural fiber in a number of applications. Plastics, derived from fossil fuels, found increasing uses beginning in the late 1920s. Energy markets became dominated by fossil fuels, and the rise of electronics was fueled by a wide array of relatively scarce and high environmental impact metals. Today, wood and non-food agricultural products continue to be used in large volumes, though plant-based materials don't dominate commerce as they once did.

But a quiet revolution is underway. Based in part on rising environmental and social concerns linked to fossil fuel consumption and heavy reliance on non-renewable materials, development of new families of renewable, low impact and plant-based materials and products of all kinds is taking place in laboratories around the world. Some are already on the market, while others are in concept or developmental stages. Success to date suggests that such materials and products will become common in the future, in the process causing a significant shift back toward an economy based on biological materials. Although a return to near total reliance on biomaterials, as in the late 1800s, is not envisioned, the magnitude of expected developments is sufficient to inspire references to a coming bio-based economy.

Executive summary of report by Jim Bowyer, PhD, Dovetail Partners, August 2017.

GROTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWS

Visit GHS on the internet

Email: grotonvthistory@gmail.com

Web page: grotonvthistory.org

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Highlights of July, August and September Meetings

July 11th 2017: members present: Bing Page, Dean Page, Phyllis Burke, Deb Jurist, Brent Smith, Alyssa Smith, Phil Coutu, Diane Kreis. Plans were made for: sponsoring a Road Rally; mailing Fundraising Letters; publishing Seth Eastman's World War I Book; purchasing Window Shades; repairing GHS sign; and painting roof of Peter Paul House. Treasurer Report for the current year showed income of \$886.47 and expenses of \$1,775.62. Operating balance on hand is \$2,416.88 and savings balance is \$9,966.91.

August 1, 2017: members present Deb Jurist, Brent Smith, Phyllis Burke, and Phil Coutu. Brent trimmed the maple tree and turned on water at the house; Matt Nunn was hired to paint the roof; Deb will send out fundraising letter to most folks on town voting list; Seth Eastman's book is published and will be for sale at the Road Rally; Phyllis will meet with Sandy Cirone for more information on the donated quilt. Deb will open the GHS house to the Smith family for a visit on Sat Aug 5th as part of their family reunion. A junk car is in the yard and will be painted by Robin Edwards and volunteers to promote the Road Rally. Additional planning for the Road Rally Scavenger Hunt concluded it would be good to start Rally at 10:30 (the official waving of the flag); Erik will talk about event at Community Ctr. around 10; allow about 2 hours on road; back about noon for Chicken Cookout, pizza (from My famers market), pie by GHS? Veterans Park. Event is by donation. Breakfast items will be for sale at Community Center and snacks at GHS. Entry form and prizes are needed for Road Rally? Phyllis suggested a couple of ideas for possible future programs: a presentation on all "businesses" that have occurred in Groton; and a presentation on the Sears Roebuck homes or noted architectural houses in town. Treasures report for the

year showed income of \$903.47 and expenses of \$1,882.01. Operating balance on hand \$2,375.49 and savings balance \$9,968.37.

September 5th 2017: members present Deb Jurist, Brent Smith, Erik Volk, Phil Coutu, Phyllis Burke, Peggy Burgin, Janet Putter, Alyssa Smith. Plans for the Road Rally were finalized. The “junk” car parked at the Peter Paul House was painted in “Van Gogh style” to advertise the Road Rally. Groton Historical Society sign was rebuilt by Richard Montague and painted by Peter Baker. Roof was painted by Matt Nunn. Plans were made to clean the house at the October meeting in preparation for Fall Foliage Day visitors on October 7, 2017. Treasurer’s report is not available.

Other News

September 23, 2017 the Groton Historical Society and the Groton Recreation Committee sponsored Road Rally History Hunt was a success. Seven teams participated in the History Hunt which brought participants all over Groton looking for our hidden symbols from Lake Seyon Park to Lake Groton to the Peacham line! Congratulations to The Milk House and The Stone Housers who tied for first place, completing the rally in 39 miles! The winning teams had to identify and visit all locations and find the shortest routes to them. Odometer readings were recorded at the start and finish of the event to determine the winner. Participants and spectators met at Veterans Park in Groton after the Rally for a musical performance by the Strawberry Farm Band, a chicken barbecue hosted by the Groton Fire Department, plus pie, snacks, drinks, treats and surprises!

September 30, 2017 Cross Vermont Trail Fall Foliage Bicycle Ride will start at Kettle Pond parking lot at 10 am. and end at Blue Mountain Union School for a home-style cook out.

October 7, 2017 FALL FOLIAGE DAY in Groton—Lumberjack Breakfast at the Methodist Church, book sale at Library, Peter Paul Historical House open for visitors, the Great Pumpkin weigh in at the Upper Valley Grill, parade led by the Blue Mountain School Band, 62nd annual CHICKEN PIE SUPPER, and Old Fashion Hymn Sing, at the Baptist Church,

Groton Historical Society Newsletter
Editor jwbenzie@mchsi.com
P. O. Box 89
Groton, VT 05046-0089

