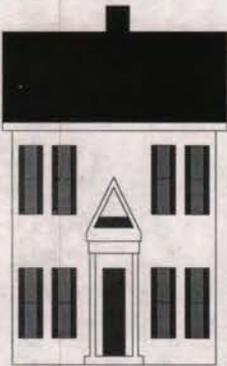

Stratford Historical Society >> UPDATE

A Hand on the PAST >> An Eye to the FUTURE

Volume II Issue III

January 1998



Slavery is the great and foul stain upon the North American Union, and it is a contemplation worthy of the most exalted soul whether its total abolition is or is not practicable.

*John Quincy Adams
(1767-1848)*

Coming Event...
Hold open the date of April 18th for our Annual Antique Show.

NEXT GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Friday, January 23, 1998-8:00 p.m.

**Christ Episcopal Church
2000 Main Street Stratford**

“The Amistad Incident”

Jeffrey Nichols

Director of Education, New Haven Historical Society



In 1839 “LaAmistad” was a slave ship carrying 53 kidnapped Africans. During the voyage from Cuba the slaves revolted and killed most of their Spanish captors, sparing the lives of only two who they hoped would guide them home. When the Amistad was intercepted by an American Naval ship off the coast of Connecticut, the Africans were imprisoned in New Haven and put on trial for the murder of the slain crew members.

The trial became the subject for debate between the forces on both sides of the slavery issue. A battle ensued over the fate of the mutineers as to the issue of property rights. Queen Isabella of Spain insisted the slaves belonged to Spain. The case ultimately went to the Supreme Court where John Quincy Adams, at the age of 74, argued for the Africans freedom in front of the nine justices of which six were slave holders. Freedom was ultimately won and the Africans returned to their homeland.

In the Spring of 1998, construction will begin on what will represent the largest boatbuilding project in Mystic Seaport’s 65-year history. The staff at the maritime museum will undertake to build a replica of the 77-foot freedom schooner Amistad from the keel up at an estimated cost of \$2.3 million. When finished the new schooner will sail the nations’s waterways, serving as on “educational ambassador,” teaching the lessons of history, cooperation and leadership inherent in the Amistad story to Americans of all ages, interests and cultural backgrounds. The projected launching is targeted for spring in the year 2000.

The meeting is open to the public and refreshments will be served.

Letter from the President

The year 1997 was a good year in more than one way. The Society continued to be solvent, although more income would put us in a more comfortable position.

A brochure advertising the ten historical houses in lower Fairfield County was published in a joint effort with the other historical societies and the state. 1997 did not show any increase in visitors to the Judson House that can be attributed to this advertising. The program was late getting out and perhaps '98 will show some results. The Judson House will open in the Spring.

The Antique Show was a success even though the attendance was not up to expectations. The 1998 Antique Show will be held on April 18th. Volunteer help is needed, call the office 378-0630 and offer to help.

The Educational Committee introduced two new functions, the Summer Day Camp where enrolled children were taught what colonial life was like and the December opening of the Judson House and the Museum for Christmas activity. The functions were successful in purpose and financially.

The School Children Tours of the Judson House were successful and will start again in March.

The very tedious task of entering all of our accessions into the computer is progressing. The Accession Chairperson and the Curator are trying to physically examine a very large number of our items. What is their relation to Stratford history, what is its value, how many of this item do we have and many more questions are being evaluated.

Louis J. Petriel, Jr.
President

New in the Museum

A new display case is in place in the museum, ready to be painted. We will now be able to display our growing collection of duck decoys by local artists to full advantage.

We would like to acknowledge a bequest from the estate of Mrs. Alma Fowler which will be used in part to cover the cost of this case. A commemorative plaque will be placed on the case to honor Mrs. Fowler who was an extremely active member of the Society.

In May there will be a major new display in the Museum. We have United State Flags covering most of our country's history. Our Curator, Hiram Tindall is promising an excellent display.

Raymark Cleanup

On Monday, November 3rd, a ceremony was held to mark the completion of cleanup activities at the former Ramark facility. The ceremony included the planting of a tree and shrubbery to symbolize the restoration of the site. Speakers included members of Connecticut's Congressional delegations, EPA New England Administrator John DeVillars, and key representatives from the State of Connecticut and the Stratford community. The site is now ready for development.

Beardsley Fund

Ruth Beardsley Parker has made a gift in memory of her father and brother T.R. Beardsley and H.R. Beardsley. Mrs. Parker established the Beardsley Fund several years ago and supports it annually.

*I like winter
because I can
stay indoors
without feeling
guilty.*

Unknown

Christmas Gathering At Judson House

In 1750 when Captain David Judson and his family resided at Judson House, Christmas was not a day for celebration. Religious custom forbid it. December 25th was considered as any other day. It was not until the mid 1800's that indoor decorations began to appear. Candles, toys and sweets along with strings of popcorn and berries were used. It was in the spirit of future Judson families who most certainly would have adorned our lovely colonial with a festive touch that guests were welcomed on Sunday, December 7th. Junior Guides led visitors through the first floor where the aroma of spices filled the air and activities abound. In the Museum there was music by the Hearthside Waits, Silhouettes by Cheryl Collins, Chairmaker Peter Blekis, Spinners Pam Blasko and Judy Mason and cider and cookies were available.

We would like to thank Cindy Kleynowski, Chairman, and her Co-Chairmen Sandy Rutkowski and Elaine Gavoli. Also, our appreciation to: Booth House of Flowers, Dillon & Sons, JR's Florist, Phyl's Flowers and Shaw's Supermarket for their generous donations of supplies and raffle prizes.

Many thanks to the following members for their support and time;

DOCENTS: Jean Miles, Leslie Light, Dolores Hctor, Marie Kubic, JR.. GUIDES: Sarah Campbell, Amanda DiBiase, Nicole Delorenzo, Jessica Hayden, Samantha Matthews, Kerri Rutkowski, Lauren VanDam, Lauren Zawadski, Elizabeth Light, Evelyn Kubic, Oliver Kubic, Sonja Kubic, Ellen Hewitt.

PREPARATIONS: Sarah Campbell's Grandmother, Sharon Campbell, Robert Hctor, Diane Matthews, Marie Schiller, Catherine Schiller, Nick Cianciola, Barbara DiBiase, Attendant. Also Betty Applegate for taking admissions and French Marine Theodore St.Amand, who dropped in for tea in the front parlor.

Thank you Cindy, Sandy and Elaine and all who participated for a very enjoyable afternoon.

Perry Homestead

The picturesque house stands on the north side of West Broad Street. This homestead, referred to as the Perry house definitely antedates by more than a century occupancy by the Perry's has had many owners and may have been built as early as 1690.

William M. Perry and his wife, Nancy Wilcoxson of Tory Hill, were married in 1833 and had ten children, five of whom were born under the roof of this house. William Perry made boots and shoes, and had a factory in the center of Stratford. He manufactured shoes for the government during the Civil War, employing both men and women at that time. He later ran a grocery business, was Judge of Probate in 1857 and took an active interest in the growth of the town, trying for many years to get a public school for the town.

The Perry house is now unoccupied and its future is being debated. It has been suggested it be town down to make way for additional parking at the Baldwin Center, preserved for a museum, or moved to another location. This fine example of early Stratford architecture must be preserved.

Do you Know....

That Christmas Day became a legal holiday in all states between 1836 and 1890.

Stratford Duck Carvers

Duck hunting at the turn of the 20th century was important to the social and economic fiber of the Town of Stratford. The small, compact marshes of the Housatonic River (Knell's Island especially) provided good waterfowl habitat and good hunting. Markets in Bridgeport, New Haven and New York purchased ducks from this area.

Stratford marshes were a retreat for the "wealthy sport" who was guided by local men who spent much of their year on the river-guiding, fishing, oystering, etc. During the slack season these local men often found themselves with time on their hands, and supplemented their incomes by carving ducks. Most carved limited quantities for themselves, their friends or sportsmen from New York producing the technically sound and aesthetically pleasing decoys so much in demand by today's collector.

Decoy carving was one of the first expressions of American folk art. One of the earliest documented carvers of sophisticated work was Albert Laing, 1811-1886, who came to Stratford in 1863 from Rahway, New Jersey just as recreational hunting became popular. While many decoy carvers made birds in fixed positions, Laing had sleepers, swimmers, feeders, birds at rest with their heads tucked back, others with head high and watchful, and a number of other natural positions. His decoys were fore-runners of the work so highly respected throughout the country today.

Currently the most sought after Stratford carvers are: Laing, Ben Holmes 1843-1912, Charles E. "Shang" Wheeler 1872-1949, recognized as the "Stratford School", and Charles Disbrow 1885-

1955, Ken Peck 1887-1961, Bill Bedell 1904-1966, Roswell Bliss 1887-1967, Willard C. Baldwin 1890-1979 and Ralph Wells 1895-1980. Their notoriety extends far beyond the boundaries of the Town of Stratford.

To learn more about the talents of these early carvers read Chapter 39 entitled "Laing and Shang: The Decoy Carvers" in Lew Knapp's book *"In Pursuit of Paradise."* As Lew states "Laing and Shang would be astounded to know the value to collectors of the birds they gave their friends."



Slavery in Stratford

Several wealthy farmers, merchants and innkeepers owned slaves. On his farm in Ripton parish, Thaddeus Shelton had Cuffee and Dorcas, who lived in a wing of his saltbox house and worked with the family. At the end of the colonial period, Abner Judson had seven slaves living in the basement of his home on Adademy Hill.

One of the earliest emancipations on record was by John Beardsley, on Christmas Day in 1717, when he wrote. "Have freely and fully given my Negro man his time and freedom at my decease and have given him a dowry of my estate if he doth stand in need hereof, and hath given him my horse."

Possession of slaves was never widespread in Stratford; it reached its zenith in about 1756, when Stratford had a total black population of 150 out of 3,658, (4 percent), including a number of free men. After that, Stratford owners began to recognize the peculiar double standard they were practicing, and emancipations became common, even though owners had to guarantee support.

"There are limits to the extent to which one can correct for past wrongs. One may have to make peace with the past."

*Mamphela Ramphela
Vice-Chairman
University of Cape
Town*

Slavery in Stratford Prior to the Civil War

People who advocated the abolition of slavery were just as unpopular in Stratford as in the rest of the country, and, those people who did advocate the abolition of slavery in those days needed courage in the North as well as the Southern states. So bitter was the rivalry that they were openly insulted in public, branded as seditionists and often threatened with personal violence.

One night at the close of a meeting of abolitionists held at Deacon Lewis Beers house, an attack was actually made with rotten eggs. As several of the assailants had been recognized, they were arrested afterwards and with the exception of the ringleader (who left town to escape arrest) were brought before Justice of the Peace David Plante Judson for trial. The best legal talent that could be obtained was procured by both parties. Ex-Governor Henry Dutton for the prosecution and Alanson Hamlin for the defense. Court was held in the Stratford Academy, as it was the largest building then available. Almost every man in the town was present for the trial.

Even in the courtroom threats were out-spoken against the abolitionists and for all who showed any sympathy with them. And in spite of severe personal criticism and the fact that the Justice of the Peace himself was not in sympathy with the aggrieved parties, Squire Judson promptly convicted the accused and sentenced them each to pay a fine. Several prominent townsmen at once came forward and gave their notes for the aggregate amount of the fines, which needless to say were never paid.

Excerpt from Wilcoxson's "History of Stratford"



Injustice anywhere is a threat to Justice everywhere.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Slavery in the Colonies

As early as 1774 Rhode Island provided that hereafter all slaves brought into the Colony of Rhode Island should be free, and related this decision to the larger struggle for liberty.

Vermont (admitted in 1791), abolished slavery outright.

Massachusetts - Supreme Court held that the provision of the Constitution declaring "all men free and equal" meant just what it said.

Pennsylvania - Provided for gradual emancipation after 1780.

Connecticut - Gradual emancipation after 1780.

Virginia (200,000) and South Carolina (100,000) - The leaders did what they could to mitigate slavery, and some confessed their awareness that slavery was irreconcilable with the promise of freedom in the Constitution.

The Continental Congress had tried to outlaw the slave trade in 1774. Delaware prohibited it in 1776, Virginia in 1778, Maryland 1783, while North and South Carolina placed somewhat ineffective restrictions on it.

Did You Know?

In the year 1976, at the Bridgeport Bicentennial Celebration a replica of the slave ship "La Amistad" was on display. The Black Community of Bridgeport helped to sponsor this visit.

COMING EVENTS:

March 27th - "Look at 18th Century CT Architecture"
Karin Peterson, Associate Director-Curator
Antiquarian & Landmarks Society of CT

May 22nd - Lewis G. Knapp - Town Historian

April 18th - 37th Annual Antique Show

May - Captain David Judson House and the Museum will open for the season.
There will be a display of historic United States flags covering most
of our country's history in the Museum.

SWEATSHIRTS

We have a limited number of sweatshirts for sale. They are white of cotton blend with a picture of Judson House, in color, on the front. The shirts are available in adult sizes M,L,XL. The cost is \$20.00 to members, \$25.00 to non-members. If you would like to have one mailed, they will be sent Priority Mail at an additional cost of \$3.00.

NOTE: It will be announced on station WICC if the Membership Meeting must be cancelled in case of inclement weather.

*The doctor can bury
his mistakes but an
architect can only advise
his client to plant vines.*

*Frank Lloyd Wright
1869-1959*

Stratford Historical Society

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