
Stratford Historical Society >> UPDATE

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

Volume III Issue3

January 1999

NEXT GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Friday, January 29, 1999-8:00 p.m.

Christ Episcopal Church
2000 Main Street Stratford

Around The World, Today and Yesterday Lewis G. Knapp, Town Historian

*Build me straight,
O worthy Master!
Stanch and strong,
A goodly vessel
That shall laugh
at all disaster,
And with wave and
whirlwind
wrestle.*

Longfellow

*Coming Event...
Antique Show
in April
Bring us your
treasures or call
the office for
pickup.*

When Town Historian Lewis Knapp, at the time of Stratford's 350th anniversary ten years ago, wrote his history of the town, he found so much material on the maritime aspects of the town that he is writing a new book dedicated to — and titled — *Stratford and the Sea*. An abundance of newly discovered material — ship's logs, personal journals, charts, letters, customs records — all tell a story of Stratford mariners and their voyages across the sea. The Hubbells, first to sail to Manila from Stratford's Newfield Harbor; Captain George Dowdell, who sailed New York to China, to die in Canton from the plague; John Sterling, who learned his navigation on his uncle's ship, then commanded Black Ball packets to Liverpool, and rounded Good Hope bound for Whampoa Roads; Pulaski Benjamin, record breaking master of *Helena* around the Horn; able seaman Lewis Barnum, who shipped out before the mast to Canton, and more.

To get a feel for these places and these voyages, Lew and Vivienne decided to take their own trip around the world. They signed on aboard a modern containership, which called at twenty ports, and carried ten passengers at most. The trip took 106 days, from late June to early October 1997, and included every climate and every season.

A circumnavigation today is different from an early nineteenth century trip, but some things remain the same. Pre-clipper ships averaged four knots, and sometimes slatted in windless oceans for days, where modern containerships cruise at 18 to 21 knots. Their trips took almost a year; Contship Company ships follow each other at two-week intervals. The sailing ships grossed 500 to 1,200 tons; the *Contship Italy* grossed 22,000. Two canals, Suez and Panama, reduce the trip to 29,000 miles and bypass the rough seas of the antipodes, but huge new vessels now on the ways will soon use those old routes again.

Lew's slide talk will compare a modern cargoship voyage from Brooklyn to Brooklyn with the trips that our Stratford mariners took from 1796 to 1847. He will show you ports then and now — Early Canton vs. modern Hongkong just given back to China, tropic islands, typhoons in the two periods, and pirates then and now. Come learn about the vast growth in international trade, and the worldwide interdependence of nations, begun by these early mariners.

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

Letter from the President

Well, we closed the old year with the Christmas Open House. It was an excellent affair, many thanks to those who participated in it. It was a fine public relations exposure and a lot of fun for those who planned and worked on it.

Our investments ended the year with a gain despite the Up and Downs of the Financial Market. Many thanks to the Finance Committee.

We should all be trying to increase the membership of the Society. While individually we may slow down, we cannot let the work of the Society slow down. We welcome participation from all Members young, middle age or senior.

Come and visit with the office volunteers. Bring along your inquiries and suggestions or browse the library. The office is located in the lower level of the museum and is open Tuesday and Thursday mornings.

Thanks to the interstate highway system, it is now possible to travel from coast to coast without seeing anything.

Charles Kuralt

Judson House Visitors

During the 1998 season when Judson House was open from May through October, many visitors came from many areas to tour our historical house and museum.

Local Area:

Stratford 40

Milford 5

Bridgeport 4

Shelton 2

Trumbull 1

Monroe 1

Connecticut:

Southbury 26

New Haven 2

New Canaan 2

Ansonia 1

Bristol 1

New Britain 1

North Branford 1

North Haven 1

Quinebaug 1

Ridgefield 1

Washington 1

United States:

New York 9

California 5

Massachusetts 3

Texas 3

Washington DC 3

Arizona 2

Illinois 2

New Jersey 2

Virginia 2

Colorado 1

Florida 1

Georgia 1

New Hampshire 1

Oregon 1

South Carolina 1

Utah 1

Washington 1

West Virginia 1

Other Countries:

Stratford, England

Stuttgart, Germany

Pueblo, Mexico

Amsterdam, Netherlands

Edinburgh, Scotland

We appreciate the many Hosts and Hostesses who volunteered their time to welcome the visitors, with a special thank you to Jane Hill Smith and Betty Applegate. And, to Dolores Hctor, Bette Johnson, Jean Miles, Selma Clark and Kitty Whiteley who conducted the tours of the house and museum.

The Henry Johnson House

Up until the time of its destruction in 1930, the picturesque little dwelling shown in the cut above stood at the foot of Skidmore's Hill, near the point where Negro Brook winds eastward to the river, and probably held the distinction of being the oldest building then standing in Stratford. The Rev. B.L.Swan, a former pastor of the Congregational Church, who left Stratford in 1863, researched its history and found it was then 200 years old. It is said to have been once owned by the Town of Stratford, and was used as a residence for an old Negro, whence the name of "Negro Brook." It was once the property of Ephraim Stiles Wells, who acquired it from his mother Hanna, daughter of Ephraim Stiles who may have built it. Silas Clark who married Tabitha, daughter of Ephraim Stiles Wells was the next owner, while later it was the home of Silas Curtis. There is some evidence that the house may have been used for hotel purposes.

In 1854 "Sunset Cottage" was purchased by Henry Johnson whose family owned it at the time it was torn down.

In 1995 "Negro Brook" was renamed "Freeman Brook" in tribute to all the Freemans who have lived in Stratford for Centuries, who fought for our Country in the Revolutionary and Civil wars and for Susan Freeman, first black woman to be commissioned in the Army Nurse Corp.

Early American Christmas

A wonderful Christmas Festival was held on December 13th through the efforts of many. A special thank you to: Cindy Kleynowski, Leslie Light, Jean Miles, Elaine Gavoli, Pat Comer, Dave Gion, Diane Matthews, Elaine Watson, Jocelyn and Joanne Miller, Frances Sloane, Sandy Rutkowski, Dolores and Bob Hctor, Betty Applegate, Bonnie and Dean Paradise, Hy Tindall, and all of the Junior Historical Society.

Our thanks to all who participated and all who attended.

From The Old Cook's Almanac

This was the quiet season around the farm. Deep snow made most outside work impossible and the thermometer often registered thirty below at dawn.

The old-time housewife took the start of a new year seriously. A "good hand at swapping time for money," she'd plan to spend extra minutes in the kitchen turning materials that cost little or nothing into the most delectable of foods. These were the weeks when she fed her family from the stores of vegetables, meat and fruit in cellar and pantry. Turnips, cabbage, squash and onions were transformed into dishes fit to grace a king's table.

Grandmothers believed that soup stuck to the ribs of folks who had to brave the cold. The standby noon meal on Winter Mondays was Washday Soup, simmering all morning in the three-legged iron kettle that was pushed well to the back of the wood-burning stove, while the wash boiler hissed and bub-

The United States Capitol

We left you at the onset of the Civil War. Congress was not in session when the war broke out. Immediately, the War Department took over the marble spaces of the newly enlarged Capitol as barracks for Northern regiments coming into the city on the President's call for militia. The boys installed there called their new quarters "The Big Tent," they enjoyed the writing desks of congress for letters home. Mealtime found the cooks at the furnaces in the basement. Basement committee rooms were turned into a

The capitol was crowned, but not yet complete. The East portico of the new Senate wing was finished in 1864. By 1867 all the porticoes of the Representatives' wing were built, but it was 1916 before the east pediment of the house was unveiled. Amid a lot of protests a 32 1/2 foot extension was added to the central area in 1961. On July 4, 1959 President Eisenhower laid the cornerstone. A new front was ready in time for President Kennedy's inauguration on January 20, 1961.

The space crunch caught up with

Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law..no court can save it..The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women.

*Learned Hand
1944*

bakery. The aroma of fresh baked bread hover around "the monument on the hill." At one point, 1500 cots of a makeshift hospital housed the wounded of Manassas and Antietam battlefields under the rotunda dome. When Congress returned the wounded were transferred to nearby hospitals. Accusations and denials rang out on the conduct of the war. Despite all this Congress authorized the enlargement of the Dome. Thomas Crawford, sculptor created the Bronze Goddess atop the dome and called her "Armed Liberty." On Dec. 2, 1863 at noon, the last of the 5 piece statue was bolted in place.

In 1862 the crumbling sandstone was now being replaced by finely matched marble, 32 layers of paint were removed from the ironwork and toned to match the the new pristine whiteness.

Congress as 5 huge office buildings were now added to the skyline of Washington in 1965, 2 for the Senate and 3 for the House of Representatives. Surprisingly, no outside workspace was provided for Congress until 1908.

Today the Capitol stands not only as the "Monument on the Hill, but as a living memorial to our Constitution and a building worthy as a national museum. Its decoration was suggested by President John Quincy Adams during the Bulfinch construction. The huge circular hall is nearly 100 feet across and more than 180 feet high - is the heart also of the Capitol's historic art displays with its maze of halls and corridors filled with sculpture and paintings collected by Congress over the years through purchase, gift, or commissions.

This ends the articles on the Capitol.

Captain & Mrs George R. Dowdall Miniatures

The Yale University Art Gallery own portraits of Captain George Dowdall and Mrs George Robert Dowdall (Eliza Hopkins Nicoll). The Dowdall and Nicoll families held shipping interest in Stratford and New York.

Recently, The Gallery contacted the Society asking for information about the couple and Town Historian Lewis Knapp responded to their request with information concerning both families.

In 1826, General Matthias Nicoll built a home on Elm Street for his daughter and son-in-law, Captain and Mrs. Dowdall. Each year the Captain sailed in June and returned to New York the following April. In early 1830 news came to Stratford that on the previous November 1st Captain Dowdall died of Plague in Canton while Commander of the ship *Ajax*. In 1835 the widow sold the home. In 1849 when Eliakim Phelps and his family occupied the premises "the house was taken possession of by the spirits or some other unseen agencies, that continued to run riot for the ensuing eight months".**

When Knapp's new book is published it will include reproductions of the 4 3/4 x 3 1/2 inch miniatures by John Wesley Jarvis painted in 1809, courtesy of the Yale Art Gallery. In exchange, they will be provided with drafts of two chapters "The Privateers" and "The Canton Skippers" from the forthcoming book.

****Additional Reading**

In Pursuit of Paradise
Chapter 31

"The Merchant
Captains"

Chapter 36

"Apparitions on
Elm Street"

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Please Note:
The January Membership Meeting
will begin at 7:30 PM