
Stratford Historical Society >> UPDATE

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

Volume IV Issue 1

September 1999

NEXT GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Friday September 24, 1999 - 7:30pm

Christ Episcopal Church

2000 Main Street, Stratford

GUSTAVE WHITEHEAD

and his 1901 Airplane

Guest Speaker: ANDY KOSCH

*Thank God men
cannot as yet fly
and lay waste the
sky as well as the
earth.*

*Henry D. Thoreau
(1817-1862)*

*Coming Event...
Early American
Festival...
September 25th
Juried Crafters
5th CT
Regiment*

Andy Kosch, of Fairfield, is a high school science teacher at Platt Regional Vocational-Technical School in Milford. A flying buff, he believes that Gustave Whitehead, not the Wright Brothers, made the first powered flight by a human. He wasn't always a crusader for Whitehead. In the early 1980's, flying and hang-gliding were hobbies, but he became interested in who flew first after hearing a lecture by William O'Dwyer a researcher who wrote a book on Whitehead.

Kosch and a team of volunteers, created a full scale model of Whitehead's 1901 aircraft (#21). He successfully piloted the replica plane at Sikorsky Memorial Airport on December 29, 1986. Powered by two ultralight airplane engines, the aircraft flew farther than 300 feet about 4 to 6 feet off the ground. He flew the plane twice more.

"60 Minutes" on CBS television, did a report featuring an interview with Andy which will be shown as part of his presentation.

Whitehead with daughter and crew - Pine Street, Bridgeport, CT (1901)

Gustave Whitehead was a poor German immigrant who had no engineering degree, but was fascinated with flying. Born "Gustav Albin Weisskopf" on January 1, 1874 in Leutershausen, Germany he settled in Bridgeport in 1901. He conducted experiments with gliders and heavier-than-air craft.

Twenty-eight months before the Wright Brothers flew at Kitty Hawk, Whitehead made a half mile flight over Long Island Sound on August 14, 1901. There were many witnesses, including a reporter from the Bridgeport Sunday Herald. Additional flights were conducted in Easton and Fairfield.

Additional information can be found at <http://flightjournal.com/ffl.html>

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

**Early American Festival
featuring
5th Connecticut
Regiment Re-enactors**

On Saturday, September 25th, the 5th Connecticut Regiment will perform at the

Early American Festival at the Judson House grounds on Academy Hill. The hours are 10am to 5pm.

Rain date October 2nd

FEATURING

Crafters demonstrating 18th century crafts

all participants will be wearing 18th century clothing
\$3 adults, \$2 seniors and students

***Images of America*
STRATFORD**

The Stratford Historical Society is pleased to present a glimpse into the past of our community, *Images of America STRATFORD*.

The collection of photographs begins with the earliest known Stratford view in 1859 and continues through the next 120 years with scenes of people, places, and activities that are part of the town's history.

This pictorial will companion Wilcoxson's *History of Stratford* and Knapp's *In Pursuit of Paradise* to chronicle Stratford through the Ages.

The book is available at the Society office or Judson House Gift Shop for the special price of \$16.99 or, we will mail anywhere in the United States for an additional \$2.00.

THANK YOU

The following Society members deserve our appreciation for their time and expertise on various projects.

John Calhoun, Carol Lovell and Lew Knapp contributed countless hours selecting photographs and writing captions for the *Images of America* book.

The new signs in front of Judson House and the office are through the efforts of Dave Guion, Todd Lovell and Dick Blake.

Todd Lovell arranged for the new pole and American flag that now flies on the premises.

Diane Wright has spent hours entering thousands of artifacts from the card file onto the computer.

Diane Matthews selected, purchased and stocked articles in our new Gift Shoppe which is now open in the Judson House.

Dolores Hctor has faithfully tended the herb and flower gardens during the exceptionally hot very dry months of July and August.

The More things Change, the More they Stay the Same.

May 5, 1658 - It was agreed at a lawful Meeting that all the inhabitants of Stratford shall keep up there bitches when the goe to the dogg and found. If who soever sufer there bitches to go abroad after warning they are to pay ten shillings.

Even in 1658 (341 years ago) neighbors dogs caused problems.

Newsletter
Chuckle

Have you noticed
that it takes
twenty-two cents
for you to say your
two-cents worth on
a penny postcard?

THE DROUGHT 1762

For Southwestern Connecticut and parts of the East Coast, the Summer of 1999 has been one of above average heat and very little rain. It has been reported the worst drought in 100 years.

In mid-August, Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman viewed the devastation wrought by the long, dry summer while visiting farms in the area where fruits and vegetables were considered not marketable. "A drought is like cancer," Mr. Glickman said, "much more damage is done to agriculture by reason of drought than any other calamity affecting American farmers."

THE DROUGHT OF 1762

In Howard Wilcoxson's *History of Stratford*, he cites another time some 237 years ago when extreme conditions also affected the Townspeople.

Back in the year 1762, in the early part of the season there fell over this section of the country the most severe drought ever experienced. From early June till the following October not a drop of rain fell upon the parched earth, and its surface was like a bed of ashes, totally devoid of moisture. A water famine was prevalent and the wells of the neighborhood were dry. The waters of the Housatonic River, which bordered Oronoque being tide-water were therefore unfit for drinking purposes. Even the cattle refused to drink it. The situation was very grave.

Mrs. Lucy Brooks, granddaughter of the Rev. Nathan Birdseye, wrote to her son Henry on May 3, 1884 relating the story of the distressing event and the discovery of the famous prayer spring as she often heard it from her mother.

"My grandfather's farm was situated upon very high grounds in the beautiful village of Oronoque, with full view of the fine farms in the valley below, and the Housatonic River in the distance. Always in dry weather the springs on the farm became very low, so we were obliged to get the necessary supply of water from the valley below. At this particular season having drawn from their neighbors no small quantity, considering the numerous household and many heads of cattle, the time now came when the resource must also fail them. The springs in the valley became so low the neighbors sent word they could no longer supply water.

The whole family, including the domestics,

were called together and the terrible truth told them. Their appalling circumstances were then laid before the Lord, and his faithful servant, the Rev. Birdseye, prayed as he had never prayed before, that his Heavenly Father would not suffer him, with all that was his to perish for lack of water, but would provide some way that they might be sustained.

After the morning's meal was over he took his staff and walked out as was his custom to ponder and pray over the desolation around him. Slowly walking over his once fertile fields, his attention was attracted to a small dark spot in the earth. He began to scratch up the ground and was soon satisfied that it was moist. He then called to some of his men to bring their shovels or whatever was at hand and dig up the spot he had discovered. They did so and at the depth of three feet, the pent up spring burst forth, and overflowed the ground where they were standing. He lost no time in hastening to his family, to tell them the blessed news."

Prayer-Spring which burst forth its waters so long ago in answer to the earnest prayers of Rev. Birdseye no longer flows over the hills at Oronoque. The building of homes in the area required it to be piped underground and now runs to a drainage system on Main Street below. However, Prayer Spring Road now exists named for the spring that answered the Rev. Birdseye's prayers.

The Rev. Nathan Birdseye (1714-1817) was educated at Yale College and studied for the ministry with the Rev. Thomas Hawley. In 1739 he married Dorothy Hawley and had a family of 12 children, 6 sons and 6 daughters. A daughter was born next after a son in every instance.

He was pastor at West Haven until 1758 when he removed to Stratford to take charge of the family estate. He preached occasionally in the neighborhood, as there was no church within five miles of them. When he was 100 years old he was asked to preach a century sermon in the Presbyterian Church in Stratford.

He lived with his wife nearly 70 years, she being 88 when she died. The Rev. Birdseye died of old age at 103 years, 5 months and 9 days.

Everybody talks about the weather but nobody does anything about it.

Charles Dudley Warner, attributed

(The statement appeared in an unsigned editorial in the *Hartford Courant*, on which Waner was then an editor. It is often credited to Mark Twain)

PECK'S MILL DISASTER

Mrs. Helen F. Look of Columbia Tennessee recently sent a box containing several items that she thought would be of interest to the Society. The items are from a young man killed in the Peck's Mill Disaster of August 6, 1899. He was William Spencer Osborn, Jr., 19 years of age.

The son of Fannie Judson and William Spencer Osborn, Sr., he was the grandson of Lucius Judson. Mrs. Look's husband, Marvin Judson Look, was the great grandson of Lucius.

Pictured is William's unused return ticket, which Mrs. Look included along with a piece of wood from the trolley, the bowl of his pipe, his handkerchief which appears to be blood stained and a receipt from Frank L. Curtis, Undertaker and Embalmer for burial in the amount of \$140.50.

These items have been in Mrs. Look's family for many years and we appreciate her sending them as this is the 100th anniversary of that terrible tragedy.

AUGUST 6, 1899

According to Lew Knapp, Town Historian, perhaps the worst single tragedy in Stratford's history occurred on August 6, 1899 when 42 passengers boarded an excursion car to enjoy a trolley ride. It was an exciting outing in the basically pre-auto era.

The line had been opened only three days before and a light short wheel base trolley had been chartered from Milford. The car was designed for level street and the grade down to the newly constructed bridge over Peck's Mill Pond was 700 feet. It traveled on a road bed of sand and gravel fill that evidently had not been tamped or surfaced to any degree. Although the riders could not know it as they enjoyed the open air ride, it was a tragedy in the making.

When the car started down the approach, motorman George Hamilton advanced the control to the third notch. With the controller one third open and accelerating on the downgrade, the trolley was doing nearly thirty miles an hour as it started out on the bridge. The car pitched and bucked on its short truck, until the front wheels left the rail. Along the ties it bobbed, and then the flanges rode over the oaken guard rail and the car went tumbling over the edge. It landed on its roof thirty feet below.

Passengers on the outside platforms and the motorman jumped as the car plunged downward, others were flung from their seats, some out of the

car only to fall beneath the wreckage in the boggy bottom. The trolley landed upside down trapping those inside the fragile car.

William Kelly jumped from the front platform as the car left the tracks. After being narrowly missed by the falling trolley, he extricated himself from the mud and made his way to Mamie Farrell who was pinned under the wreckage. In her arms she held an unknown baby that had been thrown from its mother's lap. Kelly carried them to the embankment then went back to help more victims. The following day the paper reported that Miss Farrell, who had saved another's child, had her right leg amputated and was in critical condition and her recovery was doubtful.

The work of extracting the mangled bodies was a sickening job, and several of the men who had come to the rescue could not endure it.

The last body was brought up at about 6p.m. and the dead were taken to Town Hall for identification. Only 10 of the 42 who had begun the happy outing survived, and as Lew Knapp states "Stratford was a small town and there were few residents who were not personally touched by the tragedy."

Following the crash Motorman Hamilton was tried for manslaughter and convicted of criminal negligence for operating at an unsafe speed, but Lew says he never served jail time.

This trolley photo-circa 1904 is similar to the trolley in the 1899 disaster. The trolley line over Peck's Mill ran from 1899 to 1927.

The Freshman College Class of 1999

*To me old age is
always fifteen years
older than I am,
Bernard Baruch
(on his 85th
Birthday)*



*When I was one and
twenty
I heard a wise man
say,
"Give crowns and
pounds and guineas
But not your heart
away;
Give pearls away and
rubies
But keep your fancy
free."
But I was one and twenty
No use to talk to me.*

A.E. Houseman

1. People who are starting college this fall were born in 1980.
2. There has only been one Pope. They can only really remember one President.
3. Their lifetime has always included AIDS.
4. They have never owned a record player.
5. The expression "you sound like a broken record" means nothing to them.
6. Bottle caps have always been screw off and plastic.
7. They may have heard of an 8-track, but probably never have actually seen or heard one.
8. They have always had an answering machine.
9. The Compact Disc was introduced when they were 1 year old.
10. Most have never seen a TV set with only 13 channels, nor have they seen a black-and-white TV.
11. They have always had cable TV.
12. There have always been VCRs, but they have no idea what a Beta is.
13. They cannot fathom **not** having a remote control.
14. They are too young to remember the space shuttle blowing up.
15. They have never feared a nuclear war. "The Day After" is a pill to them, and not a movie.
16. The Vietnam War is as ancient history to them as WWI, WWII, or even the Civil War.
17. They have no idea that Americans were ever held hostage in Iran.
18. There have always been red M&M's and blue ones are not new. There used to be beige ones??
19. Roller-skating has always meant inline for them.
20. They have never seen Larry Bird play, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is a football player.
21. As far as they know, stamps have always cost 30 cents or more.
22. The Tonight Show has always been with Jay Leno.
23. They have no idea when or why Jordache jeans were cool.
24. Popcorn has always been cooked in the microwave.
25. They can't imagine what hard contact lenses are.
26. They don't know who Mork was or where he was from.
27. They never heard: "Where's the beef?", "I'd walk a mile for a camel," or "de plane, de plane!"
28. The Titanic was found? They thought we always knew where it was.
29. Kansas, Chicago, Boston, America, and Alabama are places, not groups.
30. What's a Dial Telephone?
31. There has always been MTV.

This is an excerpt from a list put together by Beloit College in Wisconsin, to make the faculty aware of the mind set of this year's incoming freshmen.

I hope this doesn't make you feel any older!

Message from the President

"TIME MARCHES ON," the title of a prior to TV radio program. It is true now, as it was then. The cadence of this year, however, has been Quick Time.

My third year as President is drawing to a close and as I look upon those years one thing stands out. It is the wonderful quality and capability of the people who make this society run. They are a moderately small group. In age they range from Junior Docents to very Senior Citizens. They are members with a few years, to members with many years of service. Still, they work together like a precision machine.

We have made a change in our Finance and Investment Program. It is an improvement but must be very carefully monitored in the future.

I asked for younger people to take over some of the functions and to initiate some new programs, they did. They sell their ideas like pros.

I can not close without a volume of thanks to John Calhoun, Carol Lovell and Lewis Knapp for their tireless efforts in writing, editing and publishing "Images of America, Stratford." This pictorial review of 140 years in Stratford should be in every home.

Louis J. Petriel, Jr.
President



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Please Note:
Dues envelope for 1999-2000
is enclosed - we appreciate your
continued support of the Society.
If an x appears above your name
your dues are not paid.