



THE MUSE

NEWSLETTER OF THE NORFOLK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

FOUNDED 1960

SUMMER 2012

The Case of the Missing Librarian

One of the large photographs on display at the Museum this summer is a pristine image of the entrance to the Norfolk Library. Printed from the early-20th century glass plate negative by photo historian Michaela Allen Murphy, the extraordinary clarity of the image allows us to appreciate the quality of materials and detail that makes the Library so appealing: the Longmeadow red stone on the first floor, the fish scale shingles on the second, and the gargoyle in the shape of an owl above the entrance. Then, as now, the Library was a beloved Norfolk institution, and its librarian Philemon Johnson was an esteemed member of the community. Described as “a man of exemplary habits” who also served as town treasurer, Johnson assisted library patrons “with a cheerful disposition and willingness that was often the subject of comment.” That is why his unexplained disappearance on Sunday, January 21, 1917, came as such a shock.

Johnson lived on the second floor of the Library and told his assistant that day that he would be visiting his sister and brother in Canaan. When he failed to return to the Library by Monday, a letter was found in his apartment. Addressed to his friend Bill Cobb, it read: “When you get this I will be dead among the rocks on Canaan Mountain. I hope my body will never be found. I cannot stand it to see daylight again.” Johnson and Cobb had often gone raccoon hunting on Canaan Mountain, and the “rocks” to which he referred formed deep caves. A search party of some fifty men and boys combed the mountain, although the six inches of snow that fell on Sunday night would have obliterated any tracks. The search continued for several days. Townsfolk listened for the Norfolk fire

bell, set to ring ten times if Johnson’s body was found. The body was not found, and the search was eventually called off.

Weeks passed. Then, on April 4, Norfolk residents were startled to read the headlines in the *Winsted Evening Citizen*: “New Haven Man Says He Shook Hands with P.W. Johnson in Elm City on January 23.” A.H. Phelps, agent for the National Life Insurance Company, was certain it was Johnson with whom he had a conversation in passing on Chapel Street two days after the librarian’s disappearance. By then, the town treasury records had been examined, and Johnson was suspected of embezzling \$20,000 of town funds. The Town of Norfolk offered a reward of \$100 for his arrest and conviction. Bulletins were printed with his description: “age 35, 5’10”, smooth face, prominent jaw, deep chin, wears nose glasses, good set of teeth,

(Continued on page 2)



IN THIS ISSUE:

Postcard Walks Through History 3
Frederic Collin Walcott: Humanitarian 4

Hillhurst Mailbox 7
50 for 50 Campaign Update Insert

From the President

One hundred years ago the world was caught up in the news of the sinking of the greatest ship on earth, the Titanic. Here in Norfolk a group of women founded an intellectual and social club named in honor of Isabella Eldridge, while a number of summer residents formed the Country Club to foster the great tradition of sports in Norfolk. At that time, photographer Frank DeMars owned and operated The Art Store in Winsted. He would spend much of next twenty years traveling around the northwest corner capturing images of these glorious decades.

Through the herculean effort of his granddaughter, Peg Giles, over 5,000 images from the DeMars collection are now on a web site www.demarsimages.com and give us a vivid picture of life in the first third of the 20th century in our little corner of the world. Of the 350 images of Norfolk, 25 enlargements are on display at the Museum this summer, printed and developed from the original glass-plate negatives by Michaela Allen Murphy. I cordially invite you to come spend some time studying these images and see the depth and details that emerge from these beautiful photographs.

To encourage the preservation of images of our town in the digital age, we are holding a contest open to all interested parties. Submit a Norfolk-themed photograph by mail or to our website www.norfolkhistoricalsociety.org where details of the contest are posted. Prizes will be awarded at the Annual Meeting on December 2, and all photographs will be considered for inclusion in the museum collection.

I hope you will join us for the receptions, gallery talks, and postcard walks we have planned for this year. We will be showing additional DeMars images this fall in a powerpoint presentation on Norfolk residences, including that of Frederic Collin Walcott. Walcott is known to many in Norfolk as a conservationist and one of the founders of Great Mountain Forest. Less well-known is his extraordinary humanitarian work during World War I, described in an article on page 4 of this newsletter.

I wish you all a wonderful summer season.

Barry Webber
President

Missing Librarian (Continued from page 1)

high instep, neat dresser, takes short steps when walking fast." As spring turned into summer, reports of sightings continued to appear, while Johnson's brother and sister remained convinced that his body would be discovered on Canaan Mountain.

On August 31, Norfolk first selectman A.P. Curtiss received a letter from an unnamed "reliable party" offering to present Philemon Johnson alive within forty-eight hours in exchange for \$500. The letter was turned over to the bond company which was unable to verify its authenticity. With the country now fully engaged in the World War, the case of Philemon Johnson eventually disappeared from the headlines. Two years later, in 1919, it was reported in the *Hartford Courant* that the skeletal remains discovered on Canaan Mountain by fern gatherers were not those of Johnson.

Then, in 1920, a breakthrough was made in the case. Philemon Johnson was sighted in Alberta, Canada where he had been living under the name of Wilbur H. Purcell. He was promptly apprehended, returned to Connecticut, and charged with embezzling \$17,000 of town funds. While in Canada he had been married, and his wife came to Connecticut to speak in defense of her husband. A lady "of western character," she captivated the Norfolk community as did Johnson's trial. Philemon Johnson was ultimately convicted of the crime and sentenced to three to seven years in state prison. After his time served, he relocated to Seattle where he died in 1931.



Librarian and town treasurer Philemon Johnson (in suit, sixth from left) poses with the Norfolk baseball team.

Postcard Walks Through History

Join us as we venture back through time and compare the Norfolk landscape now and then in early postcard images. Walks are scheduled for four Saturdays (rain dates are the following Sunday) and are free for members (\$20 for non-members). Please be sure your membership is current. See Calendar on insert for time and place.

A Walk down Laurel Way. From Dr. Ephraim Guiteau's 1778 house to the Hillhurst Hotel (once a farmhouse at the corner of Maple Avenue), we will discover what the residences that lined the street looked like in the early 20th century and who lived in them.

A Walk up Maple Avenue. Find out more about the railroad crossing, the Gymnasium, Emerson Place, Miss Rowland's boarding house known as Fairlawn, and the residential neighborhood of Maple Avenue.

A Walk around the Village Green. Learn about the evolution of the Green from an 18th century meetinghouse commons to a pleasure park lined with impressive late-19th century buildings. Postcard images of Pettibone's Tavern, Crissey Place, the Academy, and the first Parsonage provide windows into the past use of buildings and sites.



Postcard image of Emerson Place. Notice the young trees and the street sign. Photograph courtesy ©DeMarsimages.com.

A Walk in the Village Center. The architect Alfredo Taylor was responsible for the transformation of Station Place and Memorial Green in the early 20th century. This walk will take us from Taylor's Royal Arcanum Building, past Village Hall (now Infinity Hall), the Ariel Lawrence Tavern and the site of the Norfolk Inn, to Taylor's Catholic Church and War Memorial.

A Glimpse of 2012

On display this summer is a collection of cameras that span a century: a 1908 Graflex; a 1919 folding Autographic Brownie, both made by Eastman Kodak; a 1978 35mm Fujica; a 2004 Pentax compact digital; and a 2008 iPhone 3G. Today we capture images of our surroundings, friends, and family with personal hand-held devices and digital cameras. Images are no longer preserved on glass plates, and rarely on film, but stored in cyber space, or not at all. What visual record are we leaving behind for historians a century from now? Will they have access to the great "Cloud" storage system in cyber space when researching the past? In an effort to encourage the preservation of images of the year 2012 in Norfolk, we invite you to submit a Norfolk-related photograph to the contest A Glimpse of 2012. You can upload your photographs via a link on our website www.norfolkhistoricalsociety.org or mail or drop off a hard copy to us. The deadline for submission is Columbus Day, and winners will



be announced at our Annual Meeting on December 2. First prize winner will receive a framed DeMars photograph. Second prize is a copy of our 2008 book *Picturing Norfolk: 1758-1958*, and third prize is a hard-bound reprint edition of Marie Kendall's *Glimpses of Norfolk*. All photographs will be considered for the museum collection.

Frederic Collin Walcott: The Making of a Humanitarian

by Mark H. Jones

A conservationist with Norfolk roots and a summer resident of the town, Frederic C. Walcott founded the Childs-Walcott Game Preserve (later renamed Great Mountain Forest) with his friend Starling W. Childs. This article originally appeared in the Winter 2011/2012 issue of Connecticut Explored, the magazine of Connecticut history. Reprinted by permission. To subscribe, visit www.ctexplored.org. Mark H. Jones is the state archivist at the Connecticut State Library.

By the mid-20th century, Frederic Collin Walcott was a familiar politician and state government official, having served as a United States senator from Connecticut from 1929 to 1935. But his greatest claim to fame was his work with Herbert Hoover during World War I to bring relief to the hungry refugees of Belgium and Poland. When he began that work in 1915, he was 46 and a successful Wall Street banker. His later life would be transformed by public service, which began with his work with Hoover to fight hunger in a Europe wracked by war.

Frederic Collin Walcott was born into privilege and wealth in 1869 in New York Mills, New York, just outside of Utica. In the early 1800s, Walcott's grandfather established the first cotton mill in New York State. Walcott's connection to Connecticut was through his mother, a member of the Welch family of Norfolk. Several generations of Welches had gone to Yale and become doctors.



Three generations of the Welch family at their home in Norfolk: town doctor William Wickham Welch (second from the right); William Henry Welch, later Dean of Johns Hopkins Medical School (second from left); Emeline Welch and her husband William Stuart Walcott with their three children seated on the porch. Frederic C. Walcott is in the middle.

Walcott also attended Yale, graduating in 1891. He took a world tour with a cousin from 1891 to 1892 and returned to work in his father's mill, eventually sitting on the board of directors and serving as

superintendent of the mill. His life was not without tragedy. In 1899 he married Frances Dana Archbold, daughter of the founder of Standard Oil. She died of a fever on their honeymoon cruise in Yokohama, Japan. In 1905, Walcott inherited the textile works. That year was decisive for him. He sold the mill, married Mary Guthrie Hussey, and moved with her to New York City.

He had come to New York at the urging of Starling Childs, a friend he met at Yale. Childs, with whom Walcott would remain close throughout his life, was a lawyer working at the William P. Bonbright & Company, a bank that invested in hydroelectric projects around the world and that supported the creation of the General Electric Company. Walcott's friend may have convinced him that he could make money in investment banking.

Walcott was indeed a success. In 1907, the first of the big trust banks in New York, the Knickerbocker Trust, failed. Through the influence of Childs and GE founder Charles Coffin, Walcott was appointed to a reorganization committee to reopen the bank. In 1908, Walcott became a vice president there. In 1911 he left the Knickerbocker to become vice president at Bonbright & Company.

When World War I began in 1914, Walcott was 45. Like the rest of America, Walcott followed the course of the war through newspapers, gossip, and letters from English friends serving in combat. He sensed that the conflict would have a lasting effect on everyone, writing that the war would "present all manner of interesting problems and everyone of us that is left will have greater opportunities than ever for usefulness."

Under President Woodrow Wilson, the United States remained neutral at the outset of the war, but American companies still conducted business with the allies. In 1915, Bonbright & Company began negotiations with French government officials and bankers on a massive, three-month loan that would allow the French to buy war-related materials from the United States. When French officials came to

New York, Walcott sat in on the talks.

Bonbright & Company designated Walcott as its representative to negotiate war loans with both Italy and France and sent him to Europe. On November 8, 1915, he left New York. In long letters to his wife, who had stayed home with their two sons because she felt the trip would be too risky, Walcott described everything from hotels that he stayed at to conversations he had at receptions.

Walcott observed that the war had “purged” France and revived the spirit of the nation. The French were working together as never before, he noted. Everyone, even the wounded, had tasks in the war effort. He visited hospitals for the wounded servicemen and saw women of the elite classes serving there. Walcott described the wounded in horrific detail, and he gave each wounded soldier he encountered some money; he also adopted an American field hospital.

At a train station in Berne, Walcott saw “stirring scenes.” There were around “150 soldiers returning to the front line after 4 or 6 days leave with their families—one legged, one armed and sightless comrades, wives, sisters and sweethearts to see them off, knowing that 50% of them would never return,” he wrote. “I shall never forget,” Walcott continued, “the courage that those women showed, not a tear, not a cheer—nothing to stir the emotions. The gloom of it all, the cold, grey, damp night, the lights all dimmed suggested a Godless world and forced smiles of these plucky women made me feel decidedly chokey.”

In Rome Walcott met with government officials and financiers and spent a Sunday sightseeing. He expected to head back to England and then take a ship to New York, but on the night of December 6, 1915, he “received a sudden awakening” by a cable from New York saying that John D. Rockefeller Jr. was asking him to become an agent for the Rockefeller Foundation to investigate the conditions of refugees in German-held Belgium. The Foundation was prepared to give generously to feed and clothe the Belgians, but Rockefeller wanted Walcott “to spend 2 weeks there at once to investigate for the Rockefeller Foundation and report what I thought they should do about sending money.” Walcott placed the cablegram in his diary, where it remains to this day.

The Foundation also asked Walcott to meet and evaluate Herbert Hoover, who had organized

the Commission for Relief in Belgium in 1914, and evaluate his organization. Hoover was 40 and enjoyed wealth and a reputation as one of the most successful engineers in the world. In 1915, Walcott was a 46-year-old, successful international investment banker.



Frederic Collin Walcott (1869-1949)

The men hit it off immediately, as they shared a desire to perform public service to make a difference in the lives of suffering people. Walcott cabled the Foundation that the commission was a well-organized, effective organization. Meeting Hoover was a milestone for Walcott: the two would remain friends and political allies for years to come.

The Germans allowed Walcott safe passage into Belgium and invited him to tour Poland and Serbia. They claimed that they required outside food relief in order to adequately care for the Polish war refugees. This, of course, was part of a public relations scheme: the Germans portrayed themselves as caring occupiers to offset news accounts of their activities that cast them in a negative light.

Walcott’s European tour began under a cloud of danger. Crossing the English Channel, the ship’s captain dodged mines. Walcott landed safely at Rotterdam. On its return voyage the ship hit a mine and sank.

Caspar Whitney, director of the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), accompanied Walcott. On the way to Brussels, Walcott got his first view of cities and villages that had been destroyed by German shells. Walcott likely did not enter German-held territory as an entirely neutral observer. The more he saw of the harsh treatment of civilians the

(Continued on page 6)

Frederic Collin Walcott...(Continued from page 5)

angrier he got. Still, he managed to keep his opinions to himself. In Belgium, he sympathized with the civilians who were living under the rifle and gun of the occupiers, writing:

Gradually I seemed to sense the suffering that all of this [destruction and occupation] implied, the terrible mental strain that comes from living under a military despotism that is scientifically and methodically cruel, following the shock that comes from the spoliation of a nation. It had all been done so systematically and so thoroughly that the first thing that impresses one is the marvelous efficiency and tremendous power of the force that produces such results.

Poland had been occupied by Russia long before the Germans invaded. Walcott quoted one Pole as saying, "When the Russians were here they hung us; now that the Germans are here, we hang ourselves." His German host took him to shelled and burnt Warsaw. As the Russians retreated from Warsaw, leaving it to the Germans, they set fire to the city and followed a "scorched earth" strategy, leaving no food to help the Poles get through the winter.

After Warsaw fell, in September and October 1915, about a million Polish refugees followed the retreating Russian army on the road to Pinsk. Near starvation and sick with disease, the refugees died in "indescribable suffering," according to one eyewitness account. Walcott described the scene of this human catastrophe: "The remnants of clothes and the wicker baby baskets marked the places where the [refugees] stopped for the night. There were no graves. Bones were seen picked clean by the crows, which everywhere were in great numbers." The Germans boasted that they gathered those bones and made them into fertilizer. Walcott stopped counting the wicker baskets, which were traditional "cribs" for Polish infants, because the number had grown so high. Walcott would describe this scene over and over again for the rest of his life.

Walcott and Hoover agreed that there was a need for relief in Poland, and they raised awareness for their cause by placing news stories in English newspapers. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., however, cautioned Walcott not to give interviews to the press without clearance, since the United States was a neutral country. The Rockefeller Foundation

promised money for Poland after pledging funds for Belgium, but the logistics and politics among rival groups in Poland and between the combatant nations threatened to derail the food for Poland campaign. Upon his arrival in Europe, he had wondered how he could contribute to the Allies. Food for the hungry became his duty, and he told Rockefeller that he had never worked so hard for anything as he had to get food for Poland. In 1916, Walcott returned home.



*Frederic C. Walcott's residence overlooking Tobey Pond.
Photograph courtesy ©DeMarsimages.com.*

He published articles in the *National Geographic* about the plight of the Poles in 1917 and 1918 and a small tract in 1917 condemning the Prussian "system" of occupation.

Walcott's work with Herbert Hoover to raise awareness of the plight of those living under German occupation made him famous as a humanitarian. After the U.S. declared war on Germany in April 1917, he agreed to work for Hoover in the newly created United States Food Administration. He was 48, and his life's passion had shifted as a result of his first-hand observation of destruction, hungry and ill-clothed people, and the hundreds of empty wicker baskets along the road from Warsaw to Pinsk he saw in early 1916.



Thank You, Samantha

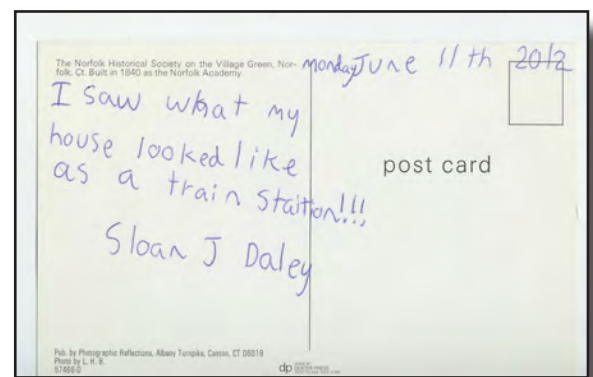
Budding historian and Northwestern Regional student Samantha Byrne completed a volunteer project at the Museum this spring under the guidance of her grandfather Richard Byrne. Samantha carefully cleaned and rearranged the interiors of our 1879 Victorian dollhouse. A gift of the Childs family, the dollhouse originally belonged to Jennie May Coffin (later Mrs. Starling W. Childs). The dollhouse is currently on the second floor of the Museum, open by appointment only, but we hope to feature it in an upcoming exhibition. Many thanks to Samantha for her dedication and interest, and a job well done!

The Hillhurst Mailbox

With instant communication and participation an expected part of this digital age, museums are increasingly incorporating visitors' voices into their exhibitions. The American Association of Museums reports that visitors want to "do" as well as "view," and museums have responded in creative ways. In 2007, when the Lowell National Historical Park exhibited Jack Kerouac's original manuscript for "On the Road," a typewriter was placed next to it on which visitors punched out more than 12,000 notes. Likewise, the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library invites patrons to type on a typewriter similar to the one Vonnegut used. One visitor wrote: "Thanks for helping me figure out who I want to pretend to be."

In the rear gallery of our DeMars exhibition, the original mailbox from Norfolk's Hillhurst Hotel has been transformed into a "tweet box." Visitors are invited to leave a "tweet" in the mailbox which will be posted on our facebook page. Tweets, text messages, and status updates on facebook are forms of instant communication. What does this have to do with postcards? In the early 20th century, postcards were often used to convey almost-instant messages. "Will look for you Saturday night on this train," was Myrtie Botelle's text message on a postcard sent to a friend in 1908.

Recently members of the 4th and 5th grade classes at the Botelle School left their tweets in the Hillhurst mailbox. They came to the Museum to explore the DeMars exhibition with the guidance of a questionnaire composed by teacher Mari Louise Torrant. In order to answer the questions, students had to closely examine each photograph. In the process, they discovered just how much history is revealed in late 19th and early 20th century images. They learned about bark sheds and the tanning industry, water wheels on the Blackberry River, and the railroad tracks that ran through town. One student proudly tweeted that he had found a postcard of the Summit Station which was now his home. History had landed on his doorstep.





Recognize this building? The photograph was taken a few years after it was built in 1883. In the venerable tradition of Norfolk female patronage, a group of ladies saw the need for an entertainment facility and undertook the necessary fundraising to make their dream a reality. *Photograph courtesy ©DeMarsimages.com.*

EDITOR: ANN HAVEMEYER

LOGO: MARY BETH WHALEN

THE NORFOLK HISTORICAL SOCIETY
13 Village Green
P.O. Box 288
Norfolk, Connecticut 06058-0288