

Newsletter of the NORFOLK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SUMMER 2016

NORFOLK, CONNECTICUT

Hidden in Plain Sight: Artists, Artisans, and Craftsmen of Norfolk's Golden Age of Architecture

Forty years ago, architectural critic and Norfolk summer resident Brendan Gill offered a significant assessment of the town's architectural heritage in a chapter of the Waldecker *History of Norfolk 1900-1975*. In the face of national enthusiasm for all things colonial with the upcoming United States bicentennial, Gill drew attention to the architectural importance of a different era in Norfolk, the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which he called Norfolk's Golden Age of Architecture. Fresh from his successful fight to save New York's Grand Central Terminal (Warren & Wetmore, 1903-1913), he concluded his chapter with a list of "indispensable" landmarks of this era, many of which were in a state of neglect. Our summer exhibition features this remarkable group of public buildings commissioned by Norfolk's civic-minded patrons in the period 1880 to 1930, especially the details of their stunning artistry and craftsmanship.

These patrons believed in the power of beautiful buildings to enrich the life of the village and to foster a sense of community and civic pride. They invested in the finest designers, artists, and craftsmen, many with national reputations, architects such as Stanford White, Bruce Price, and J. Cleveland Cady, along with regionally important Ehrick Rossiter, George Keller, and Alfredo Taylor. Their enlightened patronage combined with a wider American belief in the transformational force of beauty meant that Norfolk was the recipient of a rush of building fervor: a theater, a library, a chapel, a railroad station, a gymnasium, a memorial fountain, and an Episcopal church all rose within a decade. These stylish and well-crafted buildings reflect a breadth of artistry

and variety of aesthetic choices that give the town its distinctive character.

While the elegant new buildings are well known today, not everyone is aware of their high-quality embellishments. These are right there in plain sight, if one knows where to look. Artists and artisans of the highest caliber such as Maitland Armstrong, Louis Comfort Tiffany, and Augustus Saint-Gaudens were commissioned to work here in stained glass and bronze. Craftsmen skilled in stone, wood, and terra cotta contributed important details.

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Artistic tile from the Eldridge Gymnasium (now Town Hall)

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From the President

As we prepare for the opening of our 56th season, we look back on the past year with gratitude to the many people who made our 2015 exhibition and its related programs possible. Partially funded by a grant from CT Humanities, the exhibition *A Farmer, a Sportsman, and a Diplomat: The Romance of Collecting* explored three collections within our own collection and illustrated the interests of collectors from diverse backgrounds and time periods. The Society partnered with the Norfolk Library in hosting three programs: Lois (Bisi) Starkey told us about her father Ambassador John MacMurray's work and travels in 1920's rural China; Libby Borden with Robert Hobbs examined the collection of Grenville Winthrop; and Ann Havemeyer, Dianne Pierce, and Michaela Murphy gave a presentation on Marie Kendal's historic photographs.

Houses on the Move provided the theme for last year's major fundraising event, a progressive historic house dinner held in late July at two colonial residences that were relocated to Norfolk during the heyday of the Colonial Revival. Forty guests were treated to a beautiful cocktail reception at Torrington House, located on Old Goshen Road, hosted by Alain and Nini Saman. Guests then proceeded to the home of Martha Mullins, the Rose Terry Cook house on Doolittle Drive, where a delicious alfresco dinner was served in the garden followed by a slide talk by Ann Havemeyer and Dianne Pierce on the history of moving houses and the people who moved them. A tremendous thank you to the Saman's and Martha Mullins for their exceptional hospitality! And speaking of special events, our first annual Cake Auction was held on December 4th and was a huge success. Twelve of Norfolk's top bakers produced amazing cakes that were auctioned off. Thank you to Melissa Robinson for organizing the event, Betsy Gill for her auctioning skill, all the bakers (see photo on page 6), and everyone who joined in to make the evening such a success.

We are very grateful to all our loyal supporters for your participation and enthusiasm for our events and programs. We look forward to another busy season at the Museum!

Barry Webber

COLLECTIONS CORNER

Among the historic artifacts donated to the Society this past year is the original Norfolk Downs Golf Links sign. On one side of the sign, above the club's insignia, golfers are directed 35 miles to Hartford and on the other side 118 miles to New York. For many years the sign hung on a post on Golf Drive, as seen in the historic photo below. The sign dates back to 1897 when the Norfolk Downs golf course was built on 71 acres of Curtiss



farmland. The challenging nine-hole course was described as *a naturalist's paradise with its glacial kettle holes, its steep slopes, huge rocks and narrow fairways . . . frequently a terror to the golfer*. Capturing its former use in romantic fashion, the course was named the Downs, and what had been a country lane with meandering cattle became Golf Drive.

With the construction of a neighboring course for the Norfolk Country Club and the eventual demise of the Downs, the sign was taken down and stored in the original caddy house. That was later removed from its site, together with its contents including, presumably, this sign. Another Downs sign hung in the Curling Club and was lost in the devastating fire of 2011. We are so pleased that this one was saved.



Inside the Ryan Papers

We are thrilled to announce the publication of *Inside the Ryan Papers*, edited by Susan Betts (Manakin-Sabot, VA: Dementi Milestone Publishing, 2015) and available for purchase at the Museum. The Ryan family played an important role in Norfolk history, as documented in our award-winning 2014 exhibition *From the Mills to Main Street: Irish Families in Norfolk*. Arriving from Kilkenny, Ireland, in 1827, the Ryan brothers established a woolen mill in Norfolk, employing dozens of Irish workers.

John and Johanna Ryan's son George was born in 1836. He was educated at West Point and pursued a career in the military, rising from Second Lieutenant to Colonel before his untimely death on May 8, 1864 at the age of 28 during the Battle of the Wilderness near Spotsylvania.

To tell George's story, editor and Ryan descendant Susan Betts culled letters from the Ryan Family Papers, some 1200 documents, most dating from 1827 to 1943, transcribed and donated to The Catholic University by Jerry Goebel in 2002. Although his story had been passed down among family members along with his Commission papers, West Pint ring, and army footlocker, Susan wished to memorialize this heroic soldier by publishing letters written by George himself and his family that give a narrative of his adult life. Her inspiration came from what appears to have been an oversight. Colonel George Ryan's name is not chiseled on the Soldiers Monument on the Norfolk Village Green, dedicated to the memory of town soldiers who died for their country during the War of the Rebellion. At the time of his death, George's parents had left Norfolk for their home in Decatur, Illinois. Yet Norfolk was in fact the only home that George ever knew. Certainly the town claimed him as its own, evident in Theron Crissey's *History of Norfolk* (1900) in which a chapter is devoted to Colonel George Ryan.

Golden Age of Architecture

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Brendan Gill concluded his chapter with this plea: *Learn what is precious, and fight to preserve it!* Forty years later, we are aware of the importance of historic preservation. Although some of the buildings of Norfolk's Golden Age of Architecture are lost to us, others have been or are being lovingly restored to protect and preserve this extraordinary legacy.



Art tile from Hardware Store
(destroyed by fire)



Young George Ryan at West Point (Photo courtesy of the United States Military Academy)

Volunteers Enrich Our Work

During the course of the winter and spring, we have been graced by the help of several dedicated volunteers. Gregg Currier has been processing a large box of 18th and 19th century material related to the Stevens and Pettibone families. His archival skills are being put to good use as he patiently unfolds, organizes, and indexes deeds, letters, legal documents, and other items. Doug Pfenninger is helping to reorganize the Industry Room, making sure that everything is labelled, properly stored, and, in some cases, just plain identified.

Kaelin Hester, a student at UConn Torrington who has grown up in Norfolk and is very knowledgeable about the town's history, is transcribing the audio oral histories, assisting with technology issues, and indexing some of the many scrapbooks in our collection. Kaelin will continue her work with us in the fall, as an intern for course credit at UConn.

Thanks to these three for enabling us to move forward on key projects!

Dianne Pierce, Director

The Courtship and Marriage of Fred Smith and Harriet Bell

*In 2009 our exhibition on Norfolk's Black history charted the lives of several African-American families as pieced together from surviving records such as the Federal Census, Crissey's 1900 History of Norfolk, and period maps showing where these families lived. Missing from this history were voices from the past which would have brought to life the statistical records. A few years later, Carol Ubosi contacted us. Her mother had saved a voluminous collection of letters, which told the story of the courtship between her great aunt Harriet Maria Bell, then of Pine Plains, New York, and Fred Smith of Norfolk. Written mostly between 1883 and 1886, these letters captured the personalities of this young couple and provided a rare glimpse into the lives of two African-Americans who lived in Norfolk. The following is excerpted from "The Courtship and Marriage of Fred Smith and Harriet Bell," by Carol Ubosi and Alesia McFadden-Williams, PhD, in *American Ancestors*, vol. 17, no. 1, Winter 2016.*

In the spring of 1883, twenty-six-year-old Fred Dennis Smith may have met twenty-two-year-old Harriet Bell at the Pine Grove Campground. From 1883 through 1886, Harriet, known as "Hassie," and Fred shared their candid thoughts through letters. The couple's correspondence revealed numerous details about their lives and their concerns for the future. Harriet and Fred could read and write—and likely had received formal educations—at a time when the majority of African Americans were still in the early stages of acquiring literacy.

Harriet's parents, Samuel Esmond Bell (1836–1882) and Elmira Ann Purdy (1836–1905), had been married at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Mamaroneck, Westchester County, New York, on November 17, 1858. Samuel and Elmira Bell had six children. Harriet Maria Ann Bell, their second child, was born August 30, 1860 in Harrison.

Fred Smith, born in Norfolk on August 26, 1856, was one of five children. His mother, Jane (Hall) Smith, was born about 1816 in Connecticut and appears in the 1880 census; Fred's father, Samuel Smith, had died by 1880. Samuel Smith was mentioned in Theron Crissey's 1900 *History of Norfolk, Litchfield County, Connecticut* as a "man of excellent character, half a century ago known

in town by everybody." Samuel Smith had been an employee of Joseph Battell, a farmer for Robbins Battell, and a janitor at the church.

The Bell and Smith families represented a segment of the American population often ignored because of race and economic situation. Harriet worked from 1880 to 1886 for the family of William S. Eno, a lawyer and banker in Pine Plains, at his lavish home, The Pines, which still stands. In the summers, Harriet traveled with her employers to the Pine Grove Campground in Canaan, Connecticut, where spiritual revivals were held. Fred, meanwhile, worked as a servant and laborer: he tended horses, built hen houses, harvested crops, gathered produce, and served as a courier. Sometimes he traveled from his home in Norfolk to nearby towns such as Canaan and Litchfield for temporary jobs.

Although they lived far from the American South, Fred and Harriet were locked into a caste system that dictated the trajectory of their lives. Limited in employment opportunities and restricted in movement because of their meager and unstable incomes, Fred and Harriet would never achieve financial stability.

For much of their courtship, Harriet expressed reluctance about her relationship with Fred. In a letter dated February 8, 1886,

Harriet finally agreed to marry Fred: "My dear Fred, I will not fret you anymore, I will marry you on my birthday [August 30]." In early March [1886] Harriet visited Norfolk and met Fred's family. After the visit she wrote to them saying, "I had a very nice visit with you all and of course you know I love Fred." Harriet considered Norfolk as a wedding location because Fred wrote that "My mother must see the not [knot] tied for she has never seen one of her sons married."

Fred's future employment prospects were important. Where the couple would live depended on where Fred could find steady work. Harriet offered numerous suggestions. On April 13, 1886, she wrote, "There is a place out West that has been advertise[d] in my colored paper for colored families on the Washington territory coal miners and girls wages 28-40 dollars don't you think you would like to go there. I do providing we don't get sick, but I don't think you would go there for love or money would you?"

In a subsequent letter, Harriet took up the theme again, "If you can't get work year round would you go west and work in a coal mine?" Fred responded on April 25: "There is nothing better than good fresh air and hope that you will get a good deal of it for this has been

a lovely month so far. I would not think of going in to one of those coal [mines]. They are very dangerous things to deal you never know when you are safe. You often read in the papers about the mines blowing up or caving in and burying all of its contents alive. Bad enough being buried when one is dead let alone alive. My pet, don't ever think of such a thing. Please let me know what your next idea is on a situation for married life may be your next will be better."

Even before agreeing to marry Fred in February, Harriet had begun gathering and making items for her trousseau. In January 1886 she wrote, "The sheets and things has got to be made and I must do it myself. I shall make them first of everything else." She also sewed pillowcases and, by July, she had begun to practice making her bride's cake. Fred's mother gave him a feather bed and he purchased chickens, a pig, a table, and a chamber set.

Harriet was also preoccupied with thoughts of her wedding dress. She sent samples of cloth to Fred hoping he would approve of the color and material. And she explained her vision for the dress: "I thought white very thin white with white lace trimmings [trimmings] and saton [satin] boas [bows] at the side lead from the belt. Ruffles



Harriet Maria Bell

[ruffles] of white lace all down the front of the dress that is to be for me to get married in and then I entind [intend] to have a black silk for other occasions."

On October 6, 1886, Harriet Maria Bell and Fred Dennis Smith were married in the parlor at The Pines in Pine Plains. Harriet's sister Florence Bell wrote home to the family in Harrison and reported that after the wedding, the couple was showered with rice and went down to "the grove," where a very nice reception was held. Later, the wedding party traveled by train to Norfolk, where the couple was serenaded by a brass band and Florence saw Harriet's "very pleasant home."

After their marriage, Harriet and Fred lived in Norfolk until 1891, when they

moved to Poughkeepsie. With Fred still unable to find consistent employment, the family moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut, around 1893. Harriet and Fred had four children, two of whom survived to adulthood. Harriet Bell Smith died at age 35 on November 27, 1895, and was buried in the African American Cemetery in Rye, New York, near her parents. Fred returned to Norfolk after Harriet's death and died there in July 1928. His funeral was held in Battell Chapel in Norfolk, and he is buried in Center Cemetery.



Labor Day Walk

We continued our tradition of a Labor Day walk with more than 50 participants. Thanks to the Trustees of the Ellen Battell Stoeckel Estate, we were able to access the grounds off-season and get a sense of how the old Battell and Eldridge properties have merged into the beautiful park-like setting that has become an iconic image of our town.

Norfolk Collectors Featured in Connecticut Historical Society Exhibition

In conjunction with our 2015 exhibition *A Farmer, a Sportsman, and a Diplomat: The Romance of Collecting*, the Historical Society held a “Collector’s Weekend” in February to showcase what townspeople today collect and why. Items on display ranged from fountain pens to miniature furniture to Old Master drawings. At an open house on Friday evening, collectors spoke about the genesis of their collections and their passion for collecting.

On Saturday, in preparation for an exhibition and a crowd-sourced online gallery that explores four generations of childhood (born between 1930s-90s) in Connecticut, staff from the Connecticut Historical Society came to the Museum. The CHS asked for stories, objects, memories, and treasures from Norfolkiens who had grown up in the state, and they got more than they could have hoped for. A high point of the day was sisters Betsy Childs Gill and Anne Childs Collins reminiscing about making maple syrup when they were young. Betsy shared a 1966 *Weekly Reader* with the cover photo of her gathering sap in Great Mountain Forest. Anne had a wonderful time when the miniature kitchen she had played with as a child, now in the Norfolk Historical Society’s collection, was brought downstairs, and she was able to re-assemble it.

Objects and stories from Norfolk will be featured in the CHS exhibition *Growing Up in Connecticut*, which opens May 24th and runs until October 15th. Check out the online gallery (chs.org/growingup), or make plans to go to the CHS and have your own walk down Memory Lane!



Betsy Gill auctioned an assortment of extraordinary cakes, baked by these talented and creative bakers: Lisa Auclair, Susan Boucher, Sally Briggs, Carolyn Childs, Gloria Gourley, Katherine Griswold, Betsy Little, Shirley Metcalf, Bevan Ramsay, Alyson Thomson, and Caryn Trager. Many thanks to all!

Collections Care and Conservation

As caretakers of Norfolk’s history, one of our top responsibilities is to be the best stewards of our collection that we can be. With over 14,500 items in our catalog, the monumental task of care and conservation will be an ongoing project for many years. A recent bequest from the estate of long-time friend and supporter John Spofford Morgan has allowed us to create a fund to help with this task. As an initial project, we sent a rare document belonging to Michael Pupin, nationally-known inventor and engineer, to the Northeast Conservation Center where they made a high-resolution digital scan. The scan was cleaned to remove the mold and dirt that have obscured the original, giving us a readable version of this important artifact.

We are also taking a close look at how best to preserve our unique collection of the large scale Kendall photos that were on display at the Norfolk Library in January. Proceeds from the sale of Michaela Murphy’s custom prints from Kendall’s original glass plate negatives (see back cover photo) will be added to this conservation fund, which we hope will continue to grow.



Anne Childs Collins with the 19th century miniature kitchen

A “Labyrinth of Woe” in 18th-century Norfolk

An interesting scandal from the early days of Norfolk recently came to our attention, when a graduate student at the College of William and Mary contacted us for information about an excommunication from the Church of Christ that occurred in 1780. The offender was local physician Dr. John Miner, who was described by Reverend J. Wickliffe Beach (pastor of the church from 1874–1876) in his address at the church’s centennial celebration as “a man fond of speculation and argument.” His offense was his belief that polygamy was not contrary to Christian scripture. Although he did not plan to pursue the practice himself, Miner was adamant that it should be allowed within the congregation if anyone so desired.

Church records show that as early as 1765 a committee was tasked with identifying and dealing with “publick scandal” and it was called on to do so surprisingly often. The “scandalous” behaviors normally were along the lines of profanity, falsehood, slander, absence from communion, theft, counterfeiting, intemperance, and rash speech. Thus, John Miner’s case was of much more serious import than the more everyday sins of the congregants. For weeks, the matter was discussed in church meetings, councils, and committees. In

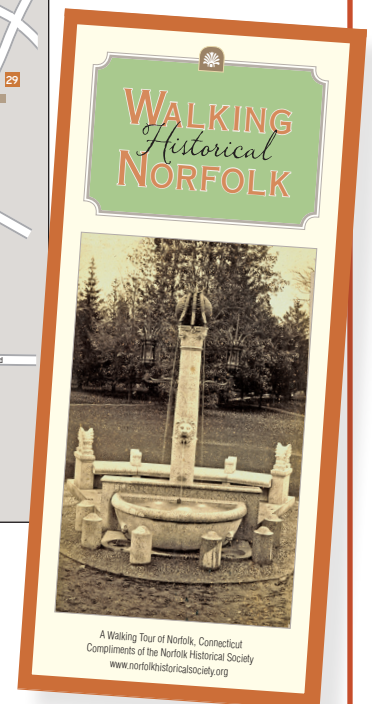
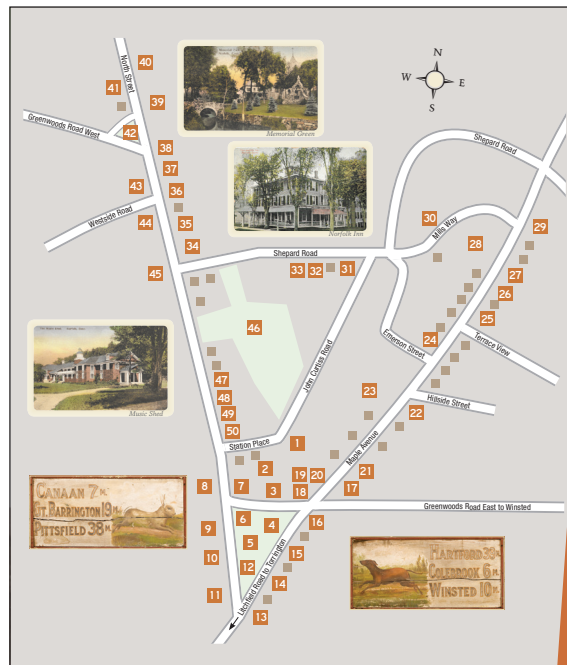
the end, in October 1780 Miner was censured and excommunicated for “heresy and scandalous conduct,” a very grave matter that meant that he was effectively banned from the town itself. A vocal minority objected to this treatment of Miner, and the issue became one of the freedom of conscience and speech as well as the morality of polygamy. It took two years to fully resolve and, according to Beach, “came nearer causing a breach in the church than any other.”

Whether Miner stayed in Norfolk is not known, but in Hartford in 1781 he published *Dr. Miner’s Defense, Being a Concise Relation of the Church Process Against Him*, an 83-page exploration of why polygamy should not be considered inconsistent with Christianity. In his preface, Miner proclaims that he holds no grudge against the church in Norfolk, but bemoans his outcast status:

ALAS TO BE THUS CUT OFF FROM PRIVILEGES IN SPECIAL ORDINANCES, AND YET TO HAVE NO WAY TO SETTLE IT, NOT BEING CONSCIOUS OF ANY GUILT ABOUT IT, AND THEREFORE COULD NOT RETRACT WITH A GOOD CONSCIENCE, AND NO PROSPECT OF A SETTLING THE MATTER WITHOUT RETRACTING IT, IS IN TRUTH SUCH A LABYRINTH OF WOE AS CANNOT BE DESCRIBED IN A FEW WORDS.

A Lasting Legacy

Early in 2015, our friend and supporter Vint Lawrence (1939–2016) came to us with the idea of producing a Historic Walking Tour Map and Guide to downtown Norfolk, similar to one he and Anne Garrels had enjoyed while visiting friends in Ohio. Ann Havemeyer and Barry Webber set to work laying out the map and writing descriptions of historic buildings on the route. Christopher Little took photographs of each building, and Melinda Belter provided the graphic design. Funded by a generous grant from the AKC Fund, the end result is a wonderfully detailed self-guided tour of the architectural gems of downtown Norfolk. If you don’t have a copy be sure to stop by the Museum, the Norfolk Library, or Town Hall to pick one up. We think you will find it an hour well spent learning about our beautiful village. The map will be featured in this season’s exhibition. We are saddened by Vint’s recent passing and deeply grateful to him and Anne for this lasting legacy.





Farmyard Scene, one of the prints made by Michaela Murphy from Marie Kendall's original glass plate negatives. Those prints are for sale at the Museum to benefit our Conservation Fund.

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Illustration of Norfolk Historical Museum by Mary Beth Whalen

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