



NORTH RIVER PACKET

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Otis Safe Robbery: The Aftermath

A wealthy family, a controversial will, a slighted nephew, and hired thugs from Boston... now that Ephraim Otis' safe has been stolen, what will become of the perpetrators?

by Janet Watson, Society Archivist

The sordid tale of the robbery of Ephraim Otis' safe from his home at (what is today) 143 Pleasant Street in Norwell was told in the last issue of the Society newsletter (available on our website under Links/Newsletters/Spring 2019). The empty safe was found a half a mile away from the house with the door removed. Now that the crime has been committed, what will happen next?

The days following the robbery confirmed the criminals' incompetence.

George Brown, a Boston bartender, told police that Charles Doherty, one of Herbert Otis' Boston accomplices, came by and asked if the bartender had seen the papers and confessed that it was "his job."



The Ephraim Otis House,
located at 143 Pleasant Street
(photo taken circa 1930s)

"Mysterious Bill" Ryan and Doherty were given the responsibility of going to New York to sell the securities found in the safe, but they backed down. J.F. Connors, another accomplice, said he "didn't give a snap for the securities" because they hadn't sold them in time,

so Herbert Otis agreed to lock them in his own safe—leaving the criminals with only \$61 in cash and nine silver spoons for their effort.

“Herbert was viewed as a young man from a good background who fell into the company of criminals...”

The authorities quickly identified the perpetrators, no doubt aided by Doherty's bragging. By Sunday, May 5 (only 6 days after the robbery) they were all under arrest. The detectives found the securities in Herbert's safe.

The *Rockland Standard* reported, "On Monday [May 6], the father of Herbert W. Otis came to Boston for the purpose of placing certain securities in the hand of his son and on reaching the city learned of the arrest...". The meeting in the jailhouse was described as "very affecting." Was John Otis bringing securities in a last effort to solve Herbert's financial problems? If so, it was now out of his hands.

On May 7, all of the defendants were arraigned in Hingham District Court.

At the close of the court, officers received information that Franklin, Herbert Otis' brother, had purchased three metal files from Calvin Gardner (who had a dry goods store in Hingham) which were found in Herbert's possession.

The trial opened June 19, 1878 and on June 21, the case was sent to the jury who deliberated for 8 hours before finding all the defendants guilty. Herbert's accomplices were given sentences of 7 to 10 years. Herbert was viewed as a young man from a good background who fell into the company of criminals but he was still sentenced to 8 years in prison.

In 1880 Herbert appears in census records three times: as an inmate at Concord Prison working as a shoe maker; in the census for the South Scituate Defective, Dependent and Delinquent Classes; and in South Scituate where his parents identified him as a household member even though he was imprisoned. His mother Ellen died in 1884 before seeing her son return home.

On April 5, 1885, Herbert Otis was released from Concord Prison after serving almost 7 years. If the family had hopes that the prodigal son would find a way to redeem his reputation, they were dashed when on April 5, 1887 the *Boston Globe* reported the arrest of Herbert (described as "a notorious burglar") and two accomplices for entering tailor shops with false keys and stealing expensive clothing and human hair that was to be used for wigs.

On April 5, 1885, Herbert Otis was released from Concord Prison after being sentenced for a five year term for safe robbery and serving eight

(continued on page 4)

FROM THE ARCHIVES



On display at the Jacobs Farmhouse Museum, this dustpan is a perfect example of yankee ingenuity. It was possibly used by the Turner family—cousins of the Jacobs and caretakers of the farm during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Did Mrs. Turner need a new dustpan and Mr. Turner, using what he had on hand, crafted this useful tool out of a piece of scrap metal and a wittled branch? In today's "buy it and toss it" culture, it's fascinating to imagine how everyday items were created 100 years ago.

Treasures known and treasures found in the Norwell Historical Society Archives, in the Society Research Library, and in the Jacobs Farmhouse Museum are featured here in each issue.

This stuffed parrot has been perched in a box in the Society Archives for as long as anyone can remember! Archivist Janet Watson recently removed it from its packing materials only to discover the following note:

"This parrot was taken from a nest in Honduras by a young explorer there with a group of men from the Smithsonian Institute in 1889. Their ship was wrecked in the Gulf of Mexico and Polly clung to the shoulder of the young man until he was rescued from the water. After a stormy voyage to Boston, she lived happily with his family.



Her conversation never included 'Polly wants a cracker,' but she whistled for the dog—much to Rover's disgust when he found out it was not his master. She called the maid when she was busy, 'Mary, Mary door bell ringing,' when it wasn't! She said good-night to her master when he came in at night. She would allow any member of the family to touch her, but not strangers—a sharp nip would follow. She caught cold while the family was out of town."

"From the collection of Frederick North Damon to M.D. Presented to Norwell Junior High School, 1964." Donated by Mr. and Mrs. Walter Reed, Mount Blue Street

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Just The Facts



Mission Statement

The purpose of the Norwell Historical Society shall be:

- a.) to plan and arrange for the promotion of knowledge about the Town of Norwell by discussion, research, meetings and publications;
- b.) to collect, solicit and preserve documents, manuscripts, charts, maps, records, photographs, relics, and items of local interest;
- c.) to arrange, index, catalog and file/maintain such material for use by the members of the Norwell Historical Society and other interested parties; and
- d.) to work with and cooperate with other entities, groups, organizations, and individuals directly and indirectly.

Museum & Research Library

The Jacobs Farmhouse Museum is open at scheduled events and by appointment only. Please contact the Society to schedule a tour.

The Norwell Historical Society Research Library at the Norwell Middle School (328 Main Street) is open on Wednesdays from 2:30 to 3:30 during the school year or by appointment.

The Norwell Historical Society Archives Center on the 3rd floor of the Sparrell School is open by appointment only.



**SIGN
UP
NOW!**

The Norwell Historical Society would like to (very occasionally...) email you about upcoming historic events on the South Shore. We will not give your information to other organizations, we want to start notifying our members and friends about historic happenings in Norwell and around the area. Please visit our website at norwellhistoricalsociety.org and scroll down to the “Stay In Touch” section.

FOUND: Notes from Laura Hatch

Notes from Church Hill resident Laura Hatch are found in the Archives and explain three unlabeled photos. Below is a snapshot of the life of a Church Hill girl... and a Society photo mystery is solved!

Some parenthetical editorial explanations are noted, but all text is original to Laura Hatch.

1893-1911

This is an outline. Incidents are not necessarily in order.

For eighteen years I lived in the Roger Stetson house [114 Stetson Road], which stood on the bend of Stetson Road (Elm Street then, I think). The Melzar Stetson house [96 Stetson] was on the left, the Walter Barker place on the right [124 Stetson], and across the street was Captain John Barker [127 Stetson].

For a little while I was the only child. I do not remember very much of those early days. I was three when my sister arrived, but I don't recall that event at all. I do recall Sunday walks with my father and coming home on his shoulder. I remember the visits to my grandmother Hatch in Marshfield.

My father had a horse and wagon. He had to have it to get to his work. He taught me to harness and “hitch up” as soon as I could reach to put on the bridle. Sometimes I drove him to work so that mother could have the horse for the day (I was my father's girl!).

Horses were very important. There was no public transportation. Stores were far apart and miles away. They came to us - the grocery one with Andy Litchfield from Norwell Center (I remember him because he brought us library books from the James Library); the butcher (I don't like that word);

Eugene Stetson, whose market was in Hanover; the fishman from Pembroke; and the baker. You put cards in the window if you wanted him to stop. Once very early a Hand Organ man came about the time of my birthday.



Laura Hatch's graduation photo.

I've wondered how he came to be away out there. Then once a year in the spring the tin peddler came with pots and pans and tubs.

I started school when I was five years old. I went to No. 7 [the North River Theater today] and I walked! Now, that would be a long walk. I don't remember that we minded. Again, the first years are hazy. I do remember the teacher, Miss Tolman, and her white apron with a bow in the back. She was special, a fine devoted teacher. Today we would say a “beautiful person.”

The fourth grade was the last primary grade. My sister came to school just as I was leaving primary and going into the Grammer Room. Mrs. Butterick was the teacher. Sometime about then

the School Committee decided to close No. 7 (too few people). My mother and two or three others objected. Without my consent, I was sent to Hanover [Academy in Hanover Four Corners]. The other No. 7 pupils were sent by [school] barge to Norwell Center. I was very unhappy. However, I got to like the school and the teacher, Frank Jones, who had been my mother's teacher when she was at Hanover Academy. I was very happy again when the next year I went with the others to Norwell. I looked forward to high school.

There wasn't much outside school to interest kids. We didn't have playgrounds, movies, TV or radio. In the summer there was all outdoors - blueberrying, strawberry picking, in the fall, nutting, and in the winter, sledding. Everyone had a sled. We played a lot of games, sometimes at our house and sometimes at my Stetson cousin Melzar's house. We made fudge, molasses candy and popcorn. My sister and I played cards with Captain John



This undated photo from the Archives shows women in aprons. Why? Laura Hatch's notes explain that teachers wore white aprons with bows—the educator's uniform of the day.

(continued on page 5)

Answer from page 4: This stoop is in front of the Carriage House on the Jacobs Farmhouse property. Frederic Jacobs, who lived in the house from 1863-1896, carved his initials in the granite.

Otis Safe Robbery, CONT'D

(continued from page 1)

years. This may indicate that Herbert was not a model prisoner, although records have not been found to verify this. If the family had hopes that the prodigal son would find a way to redeem his reputation, they were dashed when on April 5, 1887 *The Boston Globe* reported the arrest of Herbert “a notorious burglar” and two accomplices for entering tailor shops with false keys and stealing expensive clothing and human hair that was to be used for wigs. The detectives found the goods in Herbert’s home and he was arraigned and held for the next Suffolk court session in May.

Herbert pled guilty but instead of going back to prison, he received a year’s probation on condition of posting \$500 in surety and payment of \$50 for court costs, equivalent to over \$14,000 today. Once again, someone came to Herbert’s rescue and paid the required costs because Herbert was released on probation.

Less than a year later, on October 28, 1889, the *New Orleans Picayune-Times* reported “Among the prisoners in the dock yesterday morning was Herbert W. Otis,” arrested for disturbing the peace. According to the paper, Herbert had followed his young wife, now calling herself Mrs. Brandon, from New York City to New Orleans after she left him to pursue a career as a singer in a saloon. Herbert followed, begging her to return to New York but she refused, whereupon he created a disturbance and was arrested. *The Times* gives Herbert’s age as 27 instead of 33, but noted that he was an unemployed druggist. Despite the inaccuracy, his occupation, the similarity to past behavior, and the fact that there are later records of Herbert in New York City suggests that this is likely the same Herbert W. Otis. *The Times* reported that the court sympathized with him and let him off with a \$1 fine.

At this point Herbert disappears from the records for some time, but we know the fate of the other members of the Otis family.

Perhaps his early experience with the tabloid press coverage of this brother’s

crime was what led **Franklin Otis** to become a journalist, but his career was short lived because on January 1, 1889, at age 29, he died of unknown causes.

In December 1895 the *Rockland Standard* ran this headline: “A well-known citizen takes his life by drowning himself.” On December 2, **Ephraim Otis’s** body was found in the well on his property. The *Standard* reported that he had been in ill health, “evidently weary of life.” His wife was away and when she returned she found him missing. A search began, his slippers were discovered near the well

“*...his slippers were discovered near the well and Ephraim was found head down...*”

and Ephraim was found head down in the well with a long rope attached to his legs so he could be drawn out.

On February 23, 1899, **John Otis** died of Bright’s disease, a kidney disease known as chronic nephritis today. John named two heirs: Joseph and Herbert, “unknown residence.” Herbert was bequeathed the sum of \$1 and everything else was left to Joseph. After the bills were paid, the total property was \$1,788.45 in stocks and

bonds, far less than the amount left by Daniel twenty-seven years before.

In May 1899, **Gertie Otis**, Ephraim’s adopted daughter, died at age 44. Having never married, Gertie’s death left Joseph as the sole heir to the Ephraim Otis house when Deborah,



The Episcopal City Home for the Aged in New York—where Herbert Otis spent his final years.

Ephraim’s widow, died in October 1908 in Providence, Rhode Island.

Sadly, Herbert remained lost to his family. But the New York census for 1925 lists Herbert W. Otis, age 70, as a resident of Brooklyn. Perhaps Herbert was living with remorse because there is a record of baptism at the “City Mission of Episcopal Dioceses, Chapel of the Good Shepherd City Homes, Welfare Islands in New York” of Herbert Wendell Otis. There is also a record of the death of Herbert Otis, aged 73, at the Episcopal City Home for the Aged on September 21, 1928.

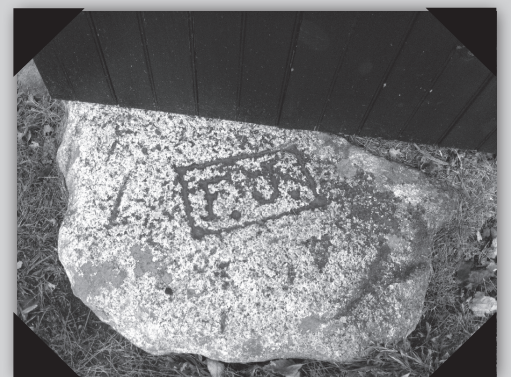
Joseph Otis married, but never had children. Joseph became Town Clerk of Norwell for six years, was a Vice President and Trustee of South Scituate Savings Bank, and a member of the James Library Committee.

The Ephraim Otis house stayed in the Otis family until Joseph’s death in July, 1931.



This granite stoop is visible at a popular Norwell location—although not at a door that is often used. **Do you know where this stoop is today and whose initials are “F.J.?”**

(answer at the bottom of page 3)



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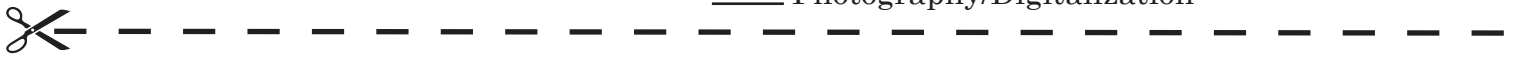
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Notes From Laura Hatch, CONT'D

(continued from page 3)

[Barker across the street] - hi-lo-jack and auction pitch. Croquet was very popular. Nearly everyone had a set, and everyone played, even my father.

After finishing the eighth grade at Norwell Center, we went on to High School in the Norwell Town Hall, still by barge. Our barge dropped the grammar school pupils at the Village School, then went around the corner to the Post Office and picked up a group of high-schoolers.

We rather enjoyed riding on the barge. There was time to do homework

together. There was one accident, I remember. One morning we were going down an incline, almost to the high school, when something frightened the two horses. They ran, the driver lost control, the horses tore loose from the barge and it tipped over into a ditch with all of us inside. We were very scared but no one was hurt seriously. The horses ran home to the Hammond Farm next door to the high school.

The September I entered high school, my father was ill, I didn't know how ill. He died in November [1906]. Everything changed; my whole world



A second photo of the crash shows the back of the barge —it is miraculous no one was seriously hurt!

To view an intact Norwell school barge, visit the Society website and scroll down to our Historic Photo Gallery. The school barge photo is first in the "Buildings & Misc. Photos" section.



This blurry photo of a school barge crash was displayed in the Society Archives, but there was no label to explain the cause or to date the event. Laura Hatch's notes tell us the crash, caused by spooked horses, took place circa 1906-1911 on Main Street near the Hammond Farm (White Oak Farm and the Big White Barn at the intersection of Circuit Street today).

was gone. It looked as though I would not be able to finish high school, but my grandmother was living with us and my mother went to work. I worked during vacations and I did finish high school. I missed my father, but I was glad to be in school. In spite of everything, I did enjoy those years and I have happy memories.

I left Norwell the day after graduation. It was hard to leave the old house and my friends and neighbors. It was hard and I always meant to go back, but until recently the time was never right.

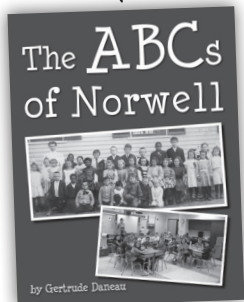


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The ABCs of Norwell (*shown at left*)
by Gertrude Daneau

\$10

A coloring book perfect for children of all ages! This illustrated book can be used as a text for teaching budding historians, or as a quick guide to Norwell's many famous personalities and historical features.

Historic Homesteads of Norwell

\$15

Always wanted to know the history behind the antique homes in town? This book delves into the background of many of Norwell's historic houses and the people who lived in them.

History of South Scituate-Norwell

\$25

by Joseph Foster Merritt

This history of the town, originally written in 1938, was republished in 1988 by the Society. A unique narrative with illustrations, it is an invaluable account of Norwell prior to WWII.

A Narrative of South Scituate & Norwell (*shown at left*)

\$20

by Samuel H. Olson

This book chronicles the life and times of our town from 1845-1963 with a collection of articles previously published in *The Norwell Mariner*. Each chapter is its own story, so this book is very readable. Looking for a single book to summarize Norwell's more recent history? This is the one.

Shipbuilding on the North River

\$45

by L. Vernon Briggs

This large book is the definitive listing of ships built on the North River and the shipyards that lined its shores. Written in 1889 and re-printed in 1988, this book also contains stories of colorful South Shore characters and harrowing sea tales. *Limited copies available.*

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norwellhistoricalsociety.org

All the above items are available at the Society Library in the Middle School on Wednesdays during the school year (2:30-3:30 p.m), or you may call Wendy Bawabe at 781-659-1464, or you may use this form and mail a check (made payable to NHS + add \$5 for shipping) to: NHS, P.O. Box 693, Norwell, MA 02061.