



# NORTH RIVER PACKET

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## The Sylvester Family, Slavery & Early Civil Rights Activism in Norwell

February marks Black History Month, and the Society is thrilled to have South Shore historian Wayne Tucker pen another painstakingly-researched article on a local Black family. Last winter Wayne wrote about Venus Manning, sister of Fruitful Sylvester—there is a link to that previous story at the end of this article.

by Wayne Tucker

Wayne Tucker is a South Shore native currently residing in Rockland. His research and writing on slavery in Plymouth County and beyond can be found at his website, called **Eleven Names Project: Recovering Enslaved People of Massachusetts** (use the QR code at the end of this article for a direct link to his website).

What does it mean to have multi-generational roots in our New England hometowns? White English people weren't the only people here before the Declaration of Independence. Wampanoag, Mattakesett, and other native peoples used and cared for Norwell's land and waters for millennia and are still here. In 1765, when Fruitful Sylvester was born enslaved, the population of people of color in Scituate/Norwell was 5%, double the colony's average. That year, census takers categorized 14 Scituate-Norwell residents as Indian and 107 residents as "negro."

What's important to understand is that these enslaved and free Black people were not transients who existed alone without kin and community. Although some mid-eighteenth-century enslaved South Shore residents were born in Africa, by the mid-1700s, most Black or multiracial residents of Massachusetts

were native to the colony and lived close to where they were born.

Still, crafting narratives of enslaved families in colonial Massachusetts remains challenging. Slaveholders forced family separations and frequently stripped enslaved people of their last names. Despite this, we can and must build family trees. We see undeniable evidence of foundational Black families like the Sylvesters, Freemans, Gunderways, and others deeply embedded in and contributing to Scituate/Norwell for decades before the Boston Tea Party. These Black families then sent children to the Revolution, to labor at shipyards, toil as housewrights and maids, and establish a tight-knit free Black community. They sent great-grandsons to fight in the Civil War at a higher rate than their white neighbors. These are deep local roots indeed.

### Family Tree

Attentive Norwell history enthusiasts may remember Fruitful from an article about his abolitionist sister, Venus Manning, or from Briggs' *Shipbuilding on the North River*:

One of the characters of the time was Fruitful Sylvester. He was a negro born of a slave in the service of a Mr. Sylvester who lived on the Chittenden place [shipyard] during the Revolution. He died about fifty

years ago and will be remembered only by the older people. He worked for the Fosters in 1820, and to show what wages were at that time he was paid for 'Killing, cutting up and salting a cow, 62 cents. 'For shearing six sheep, 36 cents.'

“ We see undeniable evidence of foundational Black families like the Sylvesters, Freemans, Gunderways, and others deeply embedded in and contributing to Scituate/ Norwell... ”

'Cutting two cords of hard wood at Grey's Hill, \$1.00,' and other labor equally cheap. He was known the country round.

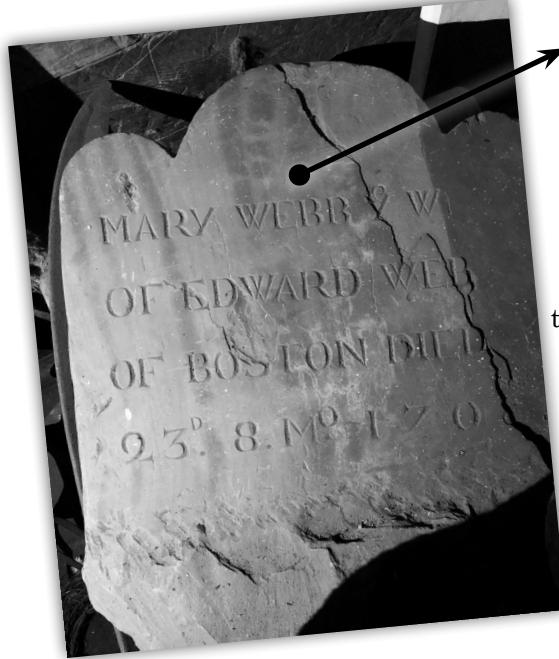
(continued on page 4)

# FROM THE ARCHIVES

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



Diana Freeman (shown at left) was the wife of Lemuel Freeman (see the article on Lemuel on page 3). Five years after Lemuel was killed during his service in the Union Army, Diana remarried to Parmenus Pierce. Diana Freeman Pierce is buried at First Parish Cemetery in Norwell Center.



The gravestone of Mary Webb, who died on August 23, 1708, is stored at the Jacobs Farmhouse. Why is Mary's stone not on her gravesite?

In 1899, George C. Turner published a newsletter titled *Historia*. In one issue, he recalls "The Quaker Cemetery," a quarter-acre burying ground used as early as 1661 and located off of River Street near the former Quaker Meetinghouse (no longer standing). Mr. Turner notes there is only one stone left at the site (in 1899)—that of Mary Webb.

Today the exact location of the cemetery is unknown, and Mary Webb's stone is safely stored with the Historical Society.

*Diana Freeman*

| DATE.    | Received. | Dividends. | PAID   |
|----------|-----------|------------|--------|
| 1863     |           |            |        |
| May      | \$32.00   |            | 32.00  |
| July     | 25.00     |            | 25.00  |
| Aug      |           | 110        | 110.00 |
| 1864 Feb |           | 142        | 142.00 |
| May      | 44.00     |            | 44.00  |
| Aug      | 101.00    | 2.00       | 103.00 |
| 1865 Feb |           | 2.60       | 2.60   |
| Apr      |           | 63         | 63.00  |
| Aug      |           | 145        | 145.00 |
| 1866 Feb |           | 147        | 147.00 |
| Aug      | 9.97      |            | 9.97   |
|          | 110.97    |            | 110.97 |

The Norwell Historical Society Archives is home to the records of the South Scituate Savings bank starting with its incorporation in 1835 until the 1950s. Several shelves of faded ledgers contain reports of the corporation meetings, records of loans and mortgages, reports on the overall health of the bank, and hundreds of pages of individual deposits and withdrawals—written in ink with blotting paper in between the pages. The ledgers are filled with familiar names of residents who deposited \$5, \$10 or \$20 at a time in the saving institution. One such record is for Diana Freeman who deposited \$101.00 and accrued \$9.97 in interest between May 1863 and February 1866.

## Just The Facts

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### 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 & Archives Center** on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the Sparrell School (322 Main Street) is open on Thursday mornings from 10:00 am until noon or by appointment.

### Administrative Consultant

Rachel Wollam

### Mission Statement

The mission of the Norwell Historical Society is to discover, preserve, and celebrate Norwell history through stewardship, education, and awareness—engaging our community, both present and future, to be vested in its history.

### Mailing Address & Phone

The Norwell Historical Society  
P.O. Box 693  
Norwell, MA 02061  
781-561-1161



# DISCOVER MORE ONLINE!

Look for the magnifying glasses in this issue—that means there is more to discover online and at the Society’s website [NORWELLHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG](http://NORWELLHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG).

## Lemuel Freeman Volunteered!

*Perhaps thinking of his grandfather’s military service during the Revolutionary War, Lemuel Freeman volunteered for the Union Army. We will never fully know why Lemuel chose to serve and, eventually, lose his life to help maintain the unity of our nation.*

by Alan Prouty

On September 3, 1862, Lemuel Freeman walked from his home on South Street in South Scituate (today’s Norwell) to Town Hall in today’s Norwell Center to volunteer to serve as a soldier in the Civil War. He was among 100 men from the town who responded to the calls from President Lincoln and Governor John Andrew in the summer and fall of 1862 for volunteers to strengthen the Union Army.

Lemuel Freeman, like most of the other men who volunteered that summer in South Scituate, was from a family that had lived in Scituate for several generations. He had learned to read and write in the local schoolhouse and had been baptized in the Second Parish Church (today’s First Parish of Norwell). He worked as a shoemaker.

However, unlike most of the new volunteers, Lemuel Freeman was a person of color and a descendant of enslaved and local indigenous people. His great-grandfather (Asher) had won his freedom and the family name of Freeman when he enlisted and served in the Continental Army from 1777 to 1782. For more information on Asher Freeman, see the link at the end of this article.

On that day in September 1862, Lemuel Freeman was perhaps thinking of his great grandfather when he signed on to serve in the Civil War as the first African American to enlist

from South Scituate. He was able to enlist because in July of that year, the U. S. Congress had passed the Militia Act of 1862 which provided that African-Americans could serve in the militias as soldiers and war laborers.

*“...unlike most of the new volunteers, Lemuel Freeman was a person of color and a descendant of slaves and local indigenous people.”*

This new legislation had reversed the Militia Acts of 1792 and 1795 which had empowered the President to only call up for military service “free able-bodied white male citizens between the ages of 18 and 45.”

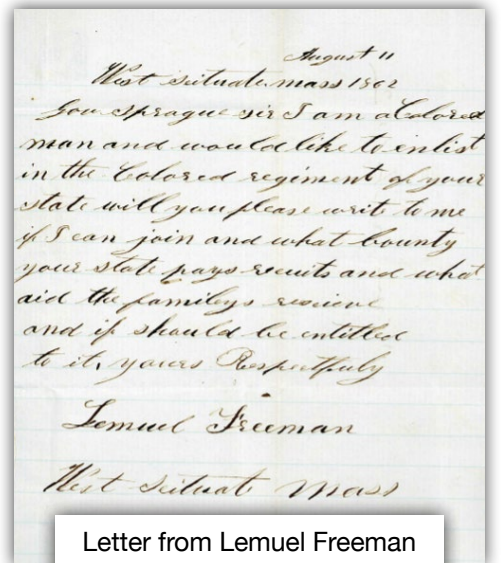
Lemuel Freeman had carefully considered how and where he might enlist to serve as a soldier in the Union Army. He made inquiries to various sources, including to the Governor of Rhode Island (see his inquiry letter at right). However in the end, he decided

to enlist to go to war with others from his hometown.

Lemuel signed on with 11 others from South Scituate to serve for nine months with the 45<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry Regiment. He and Albert Winslow were the two men of color while nine others from South Scituate were white.

The new recruits of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment received basic training at Camp Meigs and then were sent to North Carolina to disrupt the railroad supply route to Virginia. They experienced frequent skirmishes with the rebels and lost many men through that winter and spring of 1863.

*(continued on page 6)*



Letter from Lemuel Freeman to R.I. Governor Sprague:  
*“...I am a Colored man and would like to enlist in the Colored regiment of your state. Will you please write to me if I can join and what bounty your state pays recruits and what aid the familys receive and if should be entitled to it.”*



# Sylvester Family, cont'd.

(continued from page 1)

But who were Fruitful Sylvester's parents? Luckily, we have strong circumstantial evidence to build a speculative family tree. First, note that Fruitful's oldest sister was named Catherine. Then, digging into family genealogy, we find that Fruitful's first daughter was named after his wife Patty, but the couple named their second daughter Catherine. Was Fruitful's daughter, also called 'Katie,' named after her aunt? Or perhaps it was her grandmother?

Fruitful was born enslaved to "Mr. Sylvester," a shipbuilder. In neighboring Hanover church records, Newport and Kate, "negro slaves belonging to Nath'l Sylvester," married in 1760; Fruitful's oldest sister Catherine was born two years later in 1762. During this time, deeds show that shipbuilder Nathaniel Sylvester owned land in Hanover and Scituate.

Further compelling, in 1745, we find in Scituate (now Norwell) church records that an enslaved woman named Cuba baptized three children: Richard, Thomas, and Katherine. Katherine's age is unclear, and given that Cuba gained admission to the church a few months previous in 1744, Katherine may have been anywhere from toddler-age to nine(-ish) years old. And if Cuba baptized Katherine as young as age 3, she would have been 18 at the 1760 Hanover marriage of Newport and Kate and aged 20 at the 1762 birth of Catherine Sylvester.

Another enticing clue is that Cuba married a Hanover man named Jupiter, who died in 1747. Later, we find Cuba moving to Hanover in 1768, where she was admitted to the Hanover Congregational Church with a recommendation from the "2d Church of Scituate" (today's First Parish of Norwell). It appears Cuba was sold or given away, and perhaps she moved closer to her daughter and grandchildren. And I can't help but wonder if Venus (Sylvester) Manning's celestial first name was a nod to her grandfather Jupiter. If correct, this lineage establishes three generations

of Sylvesters in the Norwell/Hanover area before the Revolution.

## Land Transactions

1783 was an important year; it closed out the Revolution, and it's cited as the year gradual emancipation gained momentum in the Commonwealth. Ten years later, Fruitful and Edna Sylvester bought property in South Scituate.

A Plymouth County deed records a three-acre purchase from Melzar Stodder near Grey's/Cordwood Hill. Fruitful sold most of that property in 1795. Then, in 1796, Edna, noted as "a Black woman," appears by herself on a deed recording a land purchase, seemingly repurchasing the property.

Edna and Fruitful executed their 1793 purchase the year after the 1792 Parting Ways land grant to Black Revolutionary soldiers in Plymouth (see inset below). The earliest black land ownership in Scituate attested to in town deeds references a man named Frank/Francis "Negro" in 1699. His 1714 probate file bequeaths to his wife Margaret an unspecified acreage of property worth £100. And we know, through the excellent work of Pattie Hainer, that the Grandison family gained land in the 1740s at Norwell's Cuffee Hill.

**Plymouth's Parting Ways** was a prosperous settlement founded by four African American veterans of the Revolutionary War—Cato Howe, Prince Goodwin, Plato Turner, and Quamony Quash—and their families. Their Revolutionary service helped secure their independence, and they created the most recognized and studied African American community in Plymouth County during the early years of our new nation. The small Parting Ways Cemetery stands today along Route 80 and is the only trace of the community that was populated into the early 1900s.

Nonetheless, the Sylvester purchase of 1793 is amongst the earliest Black land purchases in Plymouth County,

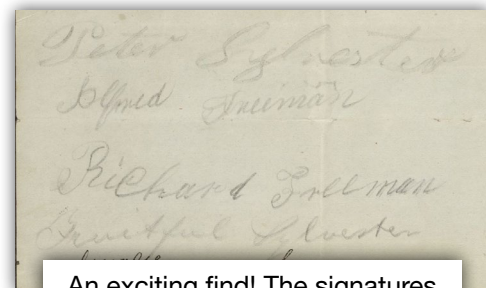


At around today's 246 Circuit Street, the "Sylvester Heirs" had a home—noted here on the 1879 map of South Scituate.

and antique maps attest that Venus Manning and the Sylvester family owned three dwellings on Circuit Street. Their heirs remained there in the early 1900s—it's worth noting that this continuous Black land ownership touches three centuries.

## Activism, Citizenship, & Legacy

Activism and pushing for full citizenship is a Sylvester tradition, especially amongst Sylvester women. When Cuba joined the church and decided to baptize her three children, although enslaved, she exercised a choice that pushed for marginal integration into white society, a choice she presumed would benefit her children. Further, Fruitful and Edna's enslaved parents couldn't buy and own property, and there were numerous barriers to Black property ownership in eighteenth-century Massachusetts. Yet, the Sylvesters found ways to assert property rights and reap financial gains.



An exciting find! The signatures of Peter Sylvester, [?] Freeman, Richard Freeman, and Fruitful Sylvester on an anti-slavery anti-segregation petition from 1839.

(continued on page 5)



# Sylvester Family, cont'd.


(continued from page 4)

What's more, Venus Manning became a life member of the New England Anti-Slavery Society. She left a gift promoting abolition that, adjusted for inflation, is worth approximately \$7,000 today. And Fruitful exercised his conscience, too—in 1839, the year of his death, his signature appeared on a petition that opposed Florida's admission to the Union as a slave state [see a copy of the signatures on the petition at the bottom of the previous page].

Furthermore, Fruitful's daughters Patty and Katie were founding members of Norwell's Church Hill United Methodist Church; constructed in 1852, it still anchors Church Street today. There are many reasons to organize a church, but it's evident



The grave of Fruitful Sylvester lies in First Parish Cemetery in Norwell Center.

Sylvesters made a statement; these are the earliest Black headstones in this burying ground that interred African-descended folks for more than a century previously. Moreover, the Sylvesters aren't scattered to disparate corners of the cemetery; the family rests eternally together. This plot is a marker of financial success and is Norwell's de facto monument to the enslaved and free Black community of South Scituate/Norwell that stretched from the 1670s to the Civil War. These long-overlooked stones are rare, regionally essential treasures that we must preserve. 



The church has a fund, started many years ago by Katie and Patty Sylvester by a donation of \$100, which has been increased from time to time. Mrs. Betsey B. Tolman was a generous contributor, and gave the society its parsonage.

This excerpt from the D.A.R.-published book *Old Scituate* notes the generosity of Katie and Patty Sylvester to Church Hill Methodist.

that Black women Patty and Katy felt some void in South Scituate's spiritual community and exercised their spiritual agency in the tradition of their great-grandmother Cuba.

Another physical mark the Sylvesters imprinted on Norwell's landscape is the impressive row of six conspicuous family headstones at Norwell's First Parish Cemetery. Again, the

To read more of Wayne Tucker's research, visit [The Eleven Names Project](#).  Wayne's site features more research and stories on slavery and Black Americans in Massachusetts and on the South Shore, and has a virtual tour of the North River Black Heritage Trail. 

To learn more about Venus Manning, sister of Fruitful Sylvester, read [Wayne's Tucker's article](#) from the Winter 2022 newsletter. The QR code at right links to the issue.  

**THROWBACK**  
PHOTO OF THE MONTH



This photo was recently found in the Archives and digitized. Where was the E.T. Fogg store located in Norwell, when was it there, and who was E.T. Fogg?  
(Answer at the bottom of page 6)

# Lemuel Freeman, cont'd.

(continued from page 3)

Fortunately, all 11 men from South Scituate survived their nine months of service with the 45<sup>th</sup> Regiment and returned to their hometown.

While the men of the 45<sup>th</sup> were in North Carolina, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. This proclaimed that “all persons held as slaves” within the rebel states “are, and henceforward shall be free.”

At the same time, President Lincoln called for the mobilization of more men of color, including ex-slaves, to join in the war to preserve the Union.

In Massachusetts, Governor Andrew mobilized several regiments filled by men of color. Renowned abolitionist Frederick Douglas and others pitched in to help recruit for these new regiments. Seven men from South Scituate signed on to fight with these regiments. These seven men and their regiments were:

- Henry Winslow (54<sup>th</sup> Regiment)
- Richard Winslow (54<sup>th</sup> Regiment)
- Warren Freeman (54<sup>th</sup> Regiment)
- William Freeman (54<sup>th</sup> Regiment)
- Benjamin Lee (54<sup>th</sup> Regiment)
- Napoleon Powell (58<sup>th</sup> Regiment)
- James Thompson (5<sup>th</sup> Calvary Reg't)

On December 10, 1863, Lemuel Freeman again left his work as a shoemaker in South Scituate to go down to the Town Hall to enlist. This time he was assigned to serve in the 58<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry Regiment which was a “Veteran Regiment” (all the recruits were required to already have served for at least nine months).

In May of 1864, Lemuel was promoted to the rank of Sergeant with the 58<sup>th</sup> Regiment and mobilized to the front lines at Petersburg. That regiment was involved in heavy fighting and experienced heavy casualties.

On June 26, Lemuel Freeman was detailed to go on picket (see inset below) with another soldier from South

**“Picket Duty”** This military duty involves patrolling the boundaries of an encampment to stop and question any person or persons who might approach—civilian or military.

Scituate, Corporal Addison Nichols. Tragically, both were shot by rebel snipers on that patrol. Addison Nichols died in the field. Lemuel Freeman was taken to the General Hospital in Washington, D.C., but died of his wounds there on July 1, 1864.

The war continued for another ten months as the Union Army moved to take Petersburg and finally defeated the rebel forces at Five Forks, Virginia.

Twenty-four of the more than 180 men from South Scituate lost their lives on the front lines of the war. In 1879, South Scituate commemorated the sacrifices of these twenty-four men with the dedication of the Civil War Monument on the town common in Norwell Center. Lemuel Freeman’s name is one of the names engraved on that monument under the inscription:

*Liberty and Union,  
Established by our Fathers,  
Preserved Unimpaired by the  
Patriotism of their Sons*



Richard Winslow, a Norwell Civil War veteran who served with Lemuel Freeman, is shown above as the flag bearer at a Memorial Day celebration in 1900.

February, Black History Month, is the month when we honor the contributions and sacrifices of African Americans in the growth of our nation. We remember and celebrate the contributions of Lemuel Freeman and the eight other men of color from South Scituate who served in the Civil War and contributed to maintaining the unity of our nation. 🍀

To learn more about Asher Freeman, grandfather of Lemuel Freeman, read Alan Prouty’s article from the Winter 2022 newsletter. The QR code at right links to the issue.



**Answer from page 5:** The E.T. Fogg store is noted on the 1879 map of South Scituate (today’s Norwell) at the current location of Coastal Heritage Bank in Norwell Center. On the 1903 map of Norwell (the next town map produced), the “E.T. Fogg Est.” is noted on the same spot, but the building had much changed. Ebenezer T. Fogg, Jr. built the store and attached the former Nash Store to his new building. In 1884, this building burned down and was replaced by a new building, shown at left.



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### INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING?

\_\_\_\_\_ Researching at the Archives \_\_\_\_\_ Other:

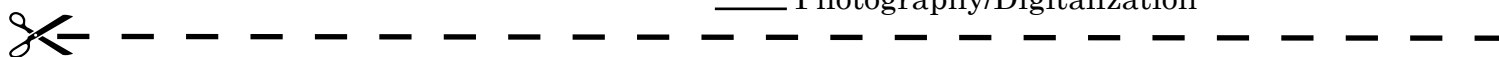
\_\_\_\_\_ Organizing at the Archives

\_\_\_\_\_ Farmhouse Tour Guide

\_\_\_\_\_ Farmhouse Maintenance

\_\_\_\_\_ Event Planning

\_\_\_\_\_ Photography/Digitalization



# The Home Front

## An Excerpt from Sam Olson's book

### *A Narrative of South Scituate/Norwell 1849-1963*

*Author Sam Olson passed away this past November. Each chapter in his book, which is for sale at the Historical Society, is its own story and therefore the book is very readable. In the chapter "Tragedy, Defeat and the Ultimate Triumph," Olson has a section on the impact of the Civil War on the economy of South Scituate.*

by Sam Olson

The major impact of the war on South Scituate [today's Norwell] was, considering its small size, the very large number of fathers, sons, and brothers who served—considerably more than half of those of military age—and the ever present fear that a loved one might never return home.

A secondary impact was the high level of prosperity engendered by the war. Agricultural production and demand soared. South Scituate's sawmills, box factories, and tack factories flourished. By Civil War times, much of the shoe making had shifted from small home workshops to factories, although local shoe factories such as Litchfield's and Groce's didn't come until the decade following the war. South Scituate shoe workers found jobs in the factories of Abington, which then included

East Abington (Rockland) and South Abington (Whitman). Abington and North Bridgewater (Brockton) together produced a very large percentage of the boots and shoes worn by the Union Army.


If shoe workers left for the army, they were quickly replaced by immigrants who, despite the war, were pouring into the country.

Local churches prepared boxes full of useful items for the soldiers, and women and girls met regularly in the Town House and in the churches making bandages and knitting socks, scarves, and so forth.

There is no record of South Scituate girls joining Miss Dorothea Dix's Nursing Corps [see inset at right], but author Louisa May Alcott, niece of Rev.

[You can buy Sam Olson's book, A Narrative of South Scituate/Norwell, and other items at the Historical Society website.](#)



Samuel May and frequent visitor to South Scituate in her childhood, did join and left an account of her work in wartime Washington in a book titled *Hospital Sketches*. 

**Dorothea Dix** was an early 19<sup>th</sup> century activist and nurse who drastically changed the medical field during her lifetime. She helped recruit nurses for the Union Army during the Civil War and, as a result, transformed the field of nursing.





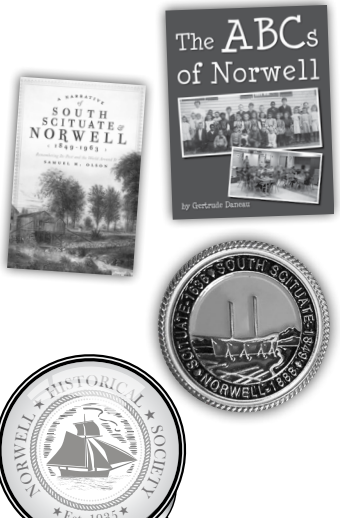
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**Winter 2023**

**HISTORICAL SOCIETY ITEMS FOR SALE**



**The ABCs of Norwell** (*shown at left*) **\$10**  
*by Gertrude Daneau*

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 historic people and sites.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**Norwell town seal pin** (*shown at left*) **\$5**

Looking for the perfect teacher gift for the holidays? Since all faculty wear lanyards, the brass and enamel town seal pin (1-inch wide) is a great gift for your child's teacher.

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to see all of the items available for purchase.



*All the above items are available for delivery (within Norwell) or will be mailed (for a \$5 fee). You may purchase items online or you may use this form and mail a check (made payable to NHS) to: NHS, P.O. Box 693, Norwell, MA 02061.*