

'The opportunities of a New England town to the industrious and frugal:' an exploration of Oxford's Cyrus Shaw

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By Nicole Carter

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OXFORD — According to the Annals of Oxford, Marquis Fayette King's history of the town's first 30 years, town father Cyrus Shaw's death on Jan. 12, 1833 was caused by "overwork."

Considering that he was 43 at the time he died and his \$40,000 estate would have a value of almost \$1.2 million in 2021, King's observation has merit.



The Kay House Museum, headquarters for the Oxford Historical Society on Pleasant Street, Oxford. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*

Shaw's remarkable life as a business man and town leader will be the topic of a round table discussion at an Oxford Historical Society meeting on Sept. 29. The meeting is at the Kay Museum House at 73 Pleasant street. It starts at 6 p.m. and is open to the public. The round table discussion, "What do you think of Cyrus Shaw, one of Oxford's first selectmen and his contributions to Oxford's unique history," will start at 6:30 p.m.

Shaw, the son of Abner and Abigail Shaw, was born in Mansfield, Mass. on March 25, 1790. Two years later his family moved to Paris. About 1812 Shaw's older brother Abner, a housewright, built a small store in the Craigie's Mill neighborhood, which is now the Pleasant Street village area.

By 1816 Cyrus, also a housewright, moved to Craigie's Mill where he established his own homestead and bought out his brother's business.

Described as possessing wondrous vitality, energy and perseverance, Shaw employed those traits to become one of Oxford's town fathers and a devoted booster of its industry.

Shaw was noted as serving his community in several capacities: justice of the peace, postmaster, church deacon, selectman and other elected positions. He built what became known as the Lake House and opened it as a hotel and trading post.

He donated the property on which the Baptist meeting-house was built and opened on Sept. 19, 1826, in the village. Ever the entrepreneur, Shaw's plan was to rent church pews out on an annual basis, using the revenues to support the meeting house.

One vision of Shaw's that was never realized was developing a canal system to link the "great ponds of Cumberland and Oxford counties." The meeting-house was built using funds he won in a share lottery managed by Canal Bank, a corporation chartered in Portland and known by that name until late in the 20th century when it merged with Key Bank.

Canal Bank's initial capital was \$300,000, with about \$27,000 allocated to the lottery system. Shaw won a \$5,000 prize after becoming an agent, which he used to fund the meeting-house. His windfall from the canal schemes is testament to his shrewdness: as King notes in the Annals of Oxford, Cyrus Shaw was a thrifty man who would not normally trade his earnings for lottery tickets. Yet he invested a sizable amount in that lottery, going so far as to buy back all that he had sold as an agent.

Speculation in canal-building went on long after Shaw's death in 1833 but the rise of railroads brought its demise. The Portland and Quebec Railroad was established in 1834. By 1849 the Atlantic and St. Lawrence Railroad began operating through Oxford, eliminating the feasibility of an interior-to-the-sea mode of water transport. It would not be a stretch to imagine that had he lived long enough, Shaw would have also been a driving force in developing rail transportation for Oxford.

The Oxford Historical Society's Sept. 29 meeting is the first to be held at the Kay House Museum since 2019, a consequence of the pandemic. Members of the society as well as the public are invited to attend. Residents interested in helping preserve Oxford's community history and artifacts are encouraged to inquire about two vacancies on the Oxford Historical Society's Board of Trustees. Please call Patricia Larrivee, president of OHS, at 207-743-0569 for more information.

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