

Discussion on the Norwell Village Area of Norwell

Thank you so much to Jayne and Bill Adams for hosting us in your beautiful, historic home—known as the Deane-Hartt House at 625 Main Street. This house was built in 1810 by First Parish as a parsonage for Reverend Samuel Deane when he moved to Scituate (remember: Norwell was part of Scituate in 1810) to be pastor alongside of Rev. David Barnes (who lived next door at 637 Main Street in what I refer to as “The Fogg Mansion”). My reference to The Fogg Mansion is a good segue into how houses are “named.” Most of the time, historic homes are named after their builder—the first resident. Sometimes, however, houses are named for their most famous resident. Hence, this house is the Deane-Hartt House because the house was built for Samuel Deane, but the house was also lived in during the mid-1800s by Joseph Hartt—a well-known Massachusetts State Representative who was considered by many as one of the greatest politicians of his time.

Both Hartt and Deane are well-known in town history. Hartt because of his political prowess, but also because of how well-loved he was despite his being a Democrat. Norwell, throughout history, has been staunchly Republican. If you read Sam Olson’s book (*A Narrative of South Scituate & Norwell*), Sam devotes an entire chapter to how conservative our town was and is. He talks about how Franklin Roosevelt, despite his national popularity, lost in Norwell in all four of his presidential campaigns by ratios of 3:1 and 4:1! State Rep. Joseph Hartt, however, was immensely popular in town and very well-respected for his ability to debate (which he probably did a lot of!).

One of the most interesting features of this home is the water tower/windmill. These towers served to lift and store water for people and for animals. This tower is one of three in Norwell: one was at May Elms Farm on Main Street and the other was at the Otis Farmhouse on Pleasant Street. There is debate as to whether or not the tower at the Whiting House on Lincoln Street was a usable water tower or a garden folly. Miss Helen Fogg, who lived next door to this house, recalled that she was relieved when the nightly rhythmic squeaking of the rotating blades eventually ceased to turn in the mid-1900s.

Samuel Deane, for whom this house was built, is also very well-known locally because he, quite literally, wrote the book: *The History of Scituate* was written in 1831 after Deane had been living in town for only 21 years. Although it is called the history of SCITUATE, Norwell was part of Scituate at that point, and Deane focuses mostly on the Norwell side of Scituate.

Since the name “Scituate” keeps being mentioned, the following is a very brief history of Norwell and its naming (and re-naming).

Settlement of what is Norwell today began in 1634 (only 14 years after the Pilgrims arrived) when Cornet Robert Stetson and his wife Honour were granted land on the North River in the vicinity of what is today called Stetson Road. A “Cornet” is a military title—Robert Stetson was a flag holder in a mounted unit and was considered a high-ranking official in town. The Stetsons were among the original “Men of Kent” who settled in Scituate Harbor after originally arriving in Plymouth from Kent, England. While most of the other Scituate residents stayed in the harbor area, the Stetsons decided to make their fortune “up river” in Norwell. And they are the first known settlers in our town.

The Town of Scituate was officially incorporated in 1636—two years after the Stetsons came up river. At that time the boundaries of Scituate included all of Norwell, parts of Hanover, and parts of Marshfield.

In the early- to mid-1600s the main “highway” through town was the North River. Hence, most settlers lived on or near the river. The original Indian paths included what-is-today Main Street and Washington Street (Route 53). So it is easy to imagine why Norwell Center became a popular area—being next to the intersection of an Indian Path and the North River.

What we know today as the Town of Norwell broke off from Scituate in 1849 and established itself as South Scituate. There are many theories as to why we separated from Scituate, but the prevailing belief is that the interests of the “inlanders” varied greatly from those of the “coast dwellers”—the primary difference being how to manage the town’s finances.

About 40 years later, in 1888, the town was again renamed—after Boston businessman, South Scituate Savings Bank president, and summer resident Henry Norwell. Mr. Norwell pledged \$2,500/year for 10 years to the town for road maintenance. When a vote was taken on a new name, “Norwell” won hands-down.

Now on to the **history of Norwell Village** in particular. You may have noticed that there are signs on either end of the Village (on Main Street near Lincoln Street and near Union Street) that welcome people to the “Norwell Village National Register Historic District.” There has been a lot of confusion about what these signs mean. Unlike Hingham (which has many Local

Historic Districts that regulate the exteriors of the homes within them), Norwell has no Local Historic Districts. A National Register District has no “teeth” legal-wise. In other words, homes within the district are not at all regulated regarding exterior changes. The only regulation for old homes (and this is true throughout Norwell, not just in this District) is regarding demolition. If a historic home is slated for demolition, the Norwell Historical Commission (not the Society—which is sponsoring this event—but the Commission) is asked to review the demolition request and they may postpone demolition for a year. The Village National Register District came about in the 1980s when a group of Main Street citizens wanted to create a Local Historic District but there was a lot of push back from residents. As a compromise, the National Register District was created. It is, essentially, an honorary title only.

Let’s start at the western edge of what we consider the Village—at the Lincoln Street intersection. Historically, this intersection is called “Henchman’s Corner.” It’s named after Joseph Henchman, who settled at that corner in 1680. His house is long gone. Another home on this corner that no longer stands is the house of Joseph Cushing—built around 1709. There is a small sign marking the site of the old Judge Nathan Cushing house (see photo at right). According to the book *Old Scituate*, there were three Cushing homesteads near this corner—the only one that still stands today is the Cushing Homestead Farm (the red house at the end of Homestead Farm Road)—which was originally built by Nathaniel Cushing, who was the brother of Nathan and grandson of Joseph.



Across the street from Homestead Farm is another Cushing House (just as an aside: the 1903 map of Norwell counts six Cushing homes between Henchman’s Corner and Town Center!). 580 Main Street (the L-shaped house where the Donahues live) was built circa 1800, but much of the Greek Revival structure we see today was built around 1850 by Dr. Albert Stetson. The house was updated extensively in the late 1800s by Florence Cushing with plans drawn up by Charles Bulfinch of Boston! Florence was a generous philanthropist and when she died, she gave the Town \$100,000 to build the Cushing Center in honor of her late father and uncle.

The Trojano House on the corner of Homestead Farm and Main has a very interesting architectural history. It was built circa 1835 by George Robbins, who was a shipjoiner, the first

vice-president of South Scituate Savings Bank, a surveyor, and a cabinet maker! I've printed out two old photos of the house that show the influence of Victorian style in the late 1800s. The first photo shows the simple, Georgian trim and the single front door (although it's obscured by the tree). The second photo shows the house after someone decided that Victorian trim was just what that house needed! Note the double front doors, the gingerbread porch, and the heavier trim below the roof and on the columned corners. Quentin Coons (a famous Norwell historian) notes that the Victorian trim was removed in 1922. Now the house is mostly back to its original form.



There's another photo that I brought that also shows this Victorian trend in Norwell Center. This photo is of the two Capes at the end of Mill Lane on Central Street—and shows a Victorian porch on the front of 48 Central Street.

This section of Main Street is often referred to as "Parsonage Row." It's a fitting name because First Parish had many ministers that lived here. As I mentioned, this home that we are in this evening was a parsonage for Rev. Samuel Deane.

Next door, the Fogg Mansion was built by Rev. David Barnes in 1770. He had previously lived in the Old Parsonage down Main Street but bought land from John Turner and began to build his new home immediately. At that same time, First Parish was building its fourth meeting house. So, services were held in the unfinished Barnes home until the new church building was completed. Rev. Barnes was a farmer and a beekeeper, and he was minister of First Parish for 57 years. When he died in 1811, the house and land were sold to John Nash who, in turn, sold the house to Capt. Isaac Whittemore and his wife, Betsey Tower Whittemore. Capt. Whittemore was lost at sea off the coast of England in 1819, leaving his wife and son, Joseph, alone in Scituate. One year later, the (according to Coons) "attractive, well-to-do

widow” married again—this time to Ebenezer Thayer Fogg who would later become the first Treasurer of Scituate Institution for Savings. (The photo at right shows Mrs. Whittemore Fogg later in life.) The Fogg family continued to live in that home (calling it



“Tower Hall”) until the mid-1900s. Helen Fogg, (shown in the photo at left) the last Fogg resident, was an amazing and philanthropic woman. Ruth Chipman Bailey wrote a book about Miss Fogg titled *Where In The World*—an account of her world travels.

The First Parish parsonage today is called the Pickels Cushing House. The house was built around 1766 by Pickels Cushing, Sr.—who was named after his mother’s maiden name. Pickels and his wife Abigail Hatch had ten children and their son, Pickels Jr., inherited the home. The house eventually made it into the Cushing family through marriage and the Cushing family gave the house to First Parish in 1878 as the parsonage for Rev. William Fish, who founded the James Library. In the photo of Main Street (at right), you can see this house with a Victorian porch too. Apparently, it was quite the trend in Norwell Center in the late 1800s. The salesman for Victorian trim must have made a fortune!



The Whittemore House (next to the Fogg Mansion, which was on the recent Historic House Tour) was built by Betsey Whittemore Fogg’s son in 1838 for his new wife. This house was also used as a parsonage in the mid-1800s. In 1865, that house was purchased by the Foster brothers and they built the large stable and the shed for their stagecoach business. The Fosters’ coaches ran from Norwell Center to Boston, Hingham, Greenbush, North Marshfield, and Hanover—and they operated for 48 years. This old photo of the Whittemore House (at right) seems to have been taken before the Foster brother’s additions. It shows



the Fogg Mansion in the background, and also shows two 3rd floor dormers that aren't on the house today.

On the corner of Main and Central Street is the John King Nash house which also served as a parsonage—for Rev. Samuel May when he first came to town. Rev. May was a famous prohibitionist who later lived down Main Street in “May Elms.” I brought an old photo of the Nash house—interesting in that it shows a (possibly Victorian-era?) bay window over the front door.



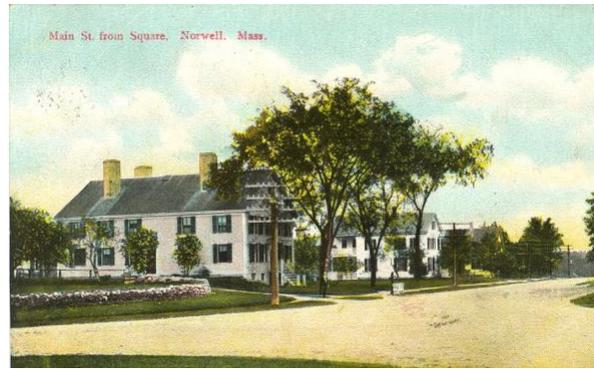
Finally, the last parsonage that I can find is The Old Parsonage, which sits atop the hill at what is historically referred to as Copper Corner (the intersection of Dover and Main Streets). On the site of this house sat the original parsonage for First Parish. In 1727, a committee of the church inspected that parsonage to determine what repairs were needed. They reported that the house was “too defective to be worth repairing” and in June 1728, the new “Old Parsonage” (which is now standing) was built in its place. Although still known by that name today, the house was only used as a parsonage for 16 years.

Back to Norwell Center, there are a few historic sites that I want to point out:

- The Almshouse: The site of the Cushing Center used to be the location of South Scituate’s Almshouse. The Almshouse served as a home for the poor in town. Residents’ taxes helped to pay the expenses of running the building and, in exchange for food and a place to sleep, the men cut wood and the women cooked and cleaned. Originally built in 1818, the building was burned down three years later by a John Woodward, who was angry with the overseers for placing his wife there. Woodward was sent to jail where he died. In 1821, a new Almshouse was built with four chimneys (a fireplace in every room!) at a cost of \$4,000. That price included a barn and a prison house with wooden cells (which is noted to have temporarily held “local offenders, tramps, and violently insane people”).



Historian Joseph Merritt has a quote that (for me) sums up the Almshouse: “The old house knew many a heartache, of people who were obliged to go there and on the other hand many found a comfortable and pleasant home in which to end their days.”



There was also a small room at the front of the building set aside for Selectmen’s meetings and it was customary for the Selectmen to eat at the Almshouse on meeting nights. The building was used until 1935, when it was torn down and Cushing Hall was built.

- The Bank: The brick edifice we know today was built in 1922 and then completely remodeled in 1934. The first banking was done at the



home of bank Treasurer Horace Fogg. Prior to being a bank, Mr. Fogg had a store on this site (you can see the dark building in the photo above of Norwell Center, which also shows the almshouse at left). There was a major fire in 1884 and the building was rebuilt as a combined bank and store with “Fogg’s Hall” on the second floor—an assembly hall for dances and shows. The 1922 brick building was built around the old frame of the 1885 structure.



- The Fire House: The current building was built in 1968—not very historic. But there used to be a small fire station on this site that was part of the old Almshouse compound. That building

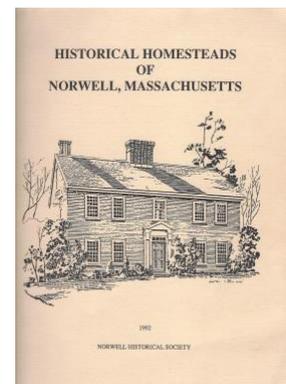


was moved to Scituate and the building shown in the photo was built in its place. This building was moved in 1968 to the corner of Lincoln Street and Norwell Avenue and the new (current) station was built.

- The Bank Drive-Thru: Why am I mentioning a drive-thru and parking lot? Because that site used to house Center School which would later become Norwell High School. These two photographs show the school as part of the Town Center, and the 1950s-era photo shows Center School at the end of its life. We believe the building was demolished in 1960s.



Quickly I will mention two other homes of special note in Norwell Center. One is the Bryant-Cushing House—one of the oldest and best-preserved homes in town. Built in 1698 by Deacon Thomas Bryant, it is one of the few houses in town on the National Register of Historic Places. The *Historical Homesteads* book features this house on its cover, and the book describes the history and architectural features of a number of Norwell Village homes. This book is available for purchase from the Historical Society (see www.norwellhistoricalsociety.org).



Moving down Main Street to the corner of Winter is the Captain Charles Turner house at 793 Main. Capt. Turner built the house for his bride, Deborah, in 1814. He died in Cuba at age 31, so he wasn't able to enjoy his new home for very long. Across the street from the house is what used to be the Turner's barn. It was moved across the street in the 1920s and redone as a home.

There is so much history in Norwell Center. I love that the Town Green and the cemetery once served as grazing fields for livestock. Historian Joseph Merritt refers to every townsman, prior to 1900, as a farmer of sorts. He said "most people kept a horse, one or two cows, a pig and poultry. Whatever occupation or trade the householder had, outside of this, the family lived almost entirely on what was raised on his place." I think it's important to remember this

when looking at Norwell Center, which today seems comparatively crowded to much of the rest of the town. Prior to the 20th century, the homes in Norwell Village all had small gardens and kept animals—even wealthy residents like the Foggs.

Quentin Coons wrote an interesting booklet in 1980 called “Norwell Village,” it goes house-by-house through the Village, and onto Central Street and down Dover Street. This book is available for review at the Society Research Library by appointment or on Wednesdays from 2:30 to 3:30. If you live in Norwell Village and your home was built before 1980, you can find a brief history of your house in this booklet.