

Talk on the Church Hill/Stetson Road Area

Typically, during our Neighborhood History Parties, I only briefly touch upon the very first history of Norwell because it doesn't usually directly relate to the neighborhood in which we are meeting. That is not the case with Church Hill—especially the Stetson side of Church Hill.

Norwell began as a section of Scituate, and Scituate was first populated by Europeans around 1628 (although the town wasn't actually incorporated until 1636). Settlers came to Scituate from Europe via two different places: Boston and Plymouth. Scituate was mostly founded by a group of people from Kent County, England via Plymouth. Timothy Hatherly led this group (which was often referred to as "The Men of Kent") to a large grant of land near the ocean in Scituate on today's Kent Street (which is the continuation of the Driftway) toward Front Street and the cliffs.

A short time after settling in Scituate, the population began to move inland up the rivers. Remember that the river was a natural highway—it was much easier to navigate than Indian paths. And... the river was a great source for salt marsh hay which was used to feed livestock.

The first settler to come to what is today called Norwell—specifically to the Church Hill area—was Cornet Robert Stetson and his wife, Honour, in 1634 (only 6 years after Scituate was first settled). A "Cornet", by the way, is a flag-bearer in a mounted military unit—it's an officer, so Cornet Stetson was considered an official in Plymouth County. The Stetsons brought their family to the area and other settlers soon followed. The original Stetson homestead was off of what is today Stetson Shrine Road.

In 1666, Nathaniel Church (presumed to be the first cousin of the famous Benjamin Church who captured King Philip) came from Hingham to occupy his large land grant extending along the North River next to the Stetsons. According to historian Samuel Deane, Nathaniel's home "stood near the river, opposite nearly to Job's Landing" (which places the site not far from Till Rock Lane today). Norwell historian Quentin Coombs mused "One wonders which earth mover at Barque Hill may have overturned this site unwittingly." Nathaniel Church married Sarah Barstow, and their descendants would run the Two Oaks Shipyard off of River Street.

Why is this part of town called Church Hill? It was named that long before the Methodist Church was built, and some wonder if it was named for Nathaniel Church. But historians have found old records that refer to the "Episcopal Church Hill," so it is believed that the hill was named for the building, not the family.

In 1725, the first recorded meeting of what would become St. Andrew's Church happened at the Damon house (we don't know where that is or if it still exists, but it's referenced as being in Church Hill). The members wanted a branch of the Church of England—not to follow the Puritan tradition. In 1727, the parish was formally organized as St. Andrew's, and in 1731, the church building was erected upon Church Hill (within the Church Hill Cemetery today). It had seating for about 150 and was built on land donated by Ebenezer Stetson (and probably built with his funding).

Because St. Andrew's was part of the Church of England, it had a hard time during the Revolutionary War. In fact, Rev. Ebenezer Thompson died in 1775 “partly from bodily disorder and partly from uncivil treatment from the rebels of his neighborhood.” There is a story that “patriots entered the Mr. Thompson's house, seized and destroyed his library, [and] the records of the church...”

Around 1809, the Society of St. Andrew's voted to erect a new church in Hanover Four Corners because the congregation was outgrowing the Church Hill building. The present-day St. Andrew's was consecrated in 1811 and services at the old church were discontinued. The old building was sold and taken down. Today, the north section of Church Hill Cemetery is marked by a Celtic Cross to show the original site of St. Andrews.

Right around the time that St. Andrew's Church closed, a Methodist “circuit” was formed between Dorchester and Duxbury—area Methodists would meet in private homes. The first Methodist meeting to take place in what-is-today's Norwell was in 1844 at the home of Mary Kimball Stetson on Stetson Road (what is today the Sgt. Samuel Stetson House that is on the cul-de-sac on Stetson Shrine Road). By 1850, land was acquired and building plans were completed—the Church Hill Methodist Church sanctuary was dedicated in 1852.

As an aside, new members to the Methodist Church were not admitted lightly. There was a probation period of 6 months during which one had to attend weekly classes, be on time, and speak plainly about the true state of one's soul! According to written accounts, several memberships were withdrawn due to “backsliding” and, in one case, because of “cruel apostasy.” I actually had to look that word up—it means the renunciation of one's Christian faith. Eek.

The North River is famous for its shipbuilding, and Church Hill was the home to many shipbuilders. This industry flourished—mostly in the 1700s and in the early- to mid-1800s. Over 1000 ships were built on the North River (and many more small boats not counted in that number). The last large ship built on the river was the Helen M. Foster in 1871—we have photographs of that launching with us tonight.

Why was shipbuilding so prevalent on the North River—especially this far up the river (almost 15 miles to the mouth of the South River which was the only outlet to the Atlantic prior to the Portland Gale of 1898)? It didn't seem practical to me to build ships this far upstream when river frontage was prevalent closer to Scituate—much easier to launch a large ship from Scituate than Brigantine Circle!

There are three major reasons why the Church Hill area was so popular for shipbuilding:

- 1) Weather closer to the mouth of the river (and closer to the ocean) was unpredictable and windy. Having a half-built ship up on stilts was precarious—you didn't want to have to worry about ocean storms.
- 2) Building a ship upstream only required one trip down the river to the ocean. So although it was more difficult, it was only a one-time issue.
- 3) My new favorite term: “The Marriage of Resources.” When two raw materials are required for any manufacturing process, proximity to both of those materials can choose your location for you. Shipbuilding required lumber and iron. The Church Hill area was filled with forests, and it was close to the ponds and bogs of Pembroke and Hanover—the source for iron. Iron was scooped out of the ponds, large “pigs” of iron were made for each shipyard, then brought to the shipyard to be forged on site into spikes and nails.

In 1831, Samuel Deane wrote the book *The History of Scituate*, and in it he notes the following about shipbuilding on the North River:

The North River... has been famous for the education of shipwrights who have emigrated and established their business along the whole coast from New York to the farthest boundary of Maine. Scarce a shipyard can be visited... without meeting many workmen who were educated at the North River.

The Society recently produced a brochure in conjunction with the NSRWA called “Shipyards of the North River” and I've brought some tonight. The brochures note the two shipyards in the immediate Church Hill area: the Bald Hill/Stetson Shipyard (which is only visible from the river in that it is currently under the Route 3 bridge) and the Fox Hill Yard, which is accessible via Brigantine Circle. Thomas Barstow's Two Oaks Shipyard was also in the Church Hill area—its location is at the end of Old Bridge Road near Hanover Four Corners.

During the Early Industrial Period (1830-1870), industry in Norwell shifted from primarily shipbuilding on the North River to manufacturing. Shoe making was a thriving industry in South Scituate (Norwell) and other South Shore towns, and associated businesses were therefore created: tack factories to make shoe tacks, box factories to ship shoes, and chemical companies for “shoe factory specialties.”

Third Herring Brook was dammed by Charles Stockbridge originally for a grist mill in the 1670s at what used to be Tiffany Pond. The mill was later run by Recompense Tiffany, for whom the street was thereafter named.

I'd like to note certain Church Hill/Stetson/Barstow homes that are of special historical note.

First of all, I need to explain that prior to Route 3 being built, Stetson Road (which used to be called Elm Street) was a loop that combined what is today Stetson Shrine Road and Stetson Road. Route 3 divided the road and the small Stetson Road continuation (parallel to Route 3) was created.

The Historical Society recently created a another brochure that is a driving tour of Civil War sites. Included in that brochure is 589 River Street (the home of the Downeys today). Nathaniel Winslow was orphaned at the age of 13 and the 1855 census shows Nathaniel living with his sister Sarah Winslow Tolman and her husband, Samuel, at 200 Tiffany Road. Sarah then died in 1855 and in 1860, Nathaniel moved in with his neighbor from childhood, Abigail Gardner, and her husband George Knapp who lived at 589 River Street—the Downey's house. Nathaniel enlisted in the Army in August of 1862, and within a month was killed in action near Shepherdstown, West Virginia. Three months later Abigail received the news that her brother Henry Gardner had also been killed in battle.

Another house of note in this area is the Thomas Barstow, Sr. house at 691 River Street (Lisa Delphin's house today, and previously the Bartlett's house). The Barstow family operated the Two Oaks Shipyard on the North River that I mentioned before. Mr. Barstow's business partner (and his cousin) was Robert Eells. Barstow oversaw the woodworking and Eells oversaw the ironwork. Two of Barstow's sons married two of Eells' daughters and it is believed that they all lived in that house (which has two distinct sides and two bake ovens). The most interesting feature of this house is the large, barrel-ceilinged room in the rear on the second floor. It is believed that this room served as the Counting Room of the Barstow yard as it would have overlooked the fields to the Shipyard.

Another well-preserved house shipbuilding home is the Thomas Barstow, Jr. House at 83 Barstow Avenue. The Barstow House was once called Fox Hill Farm, although he was not engaged at Fox Hill Shipyard but at Two Oaks with his father. The house was built by Thomas Jr. in 1782—probably

around the time of his marriage to Lydia Sylvester. Barstow descendants lived in this house until the 1980s, when the house and land were sold to a developer to create Barstow Avenue, and the house was moved to its current location at the end of the cul-de-sac.

On Brigantine Circle is a house that we call The Rose Cottage—the home of Nathaniel Church, III (born in 1698 and grandson of the original Nathaniel Church who settled in Church Hill in 1666). The house was built in 1765 and deeded to Nathaniel Church's sons. Capt. Thomas Church lived at Rose Cottage during the Revolutionary War and trained his soldiers in the field north of the house. The Church family sold the Rose Cottage in 1851. In 1895, the Kendall family of Braintree took ownership of the Rose Cottage and the Shipwright's Cottage (56 Brigantine) when they built their summer home (what is today 41 Brigantine Circle, owned now by the McGlinchys). This estate was called "Kenfields" and it included the stable at the entrance to the property (today at 3 Foxhill Lane).

There are two houses on Stetson Road that are described in detail in the Society's book *Historical Homesteads of Norwell* (which are on sale tonight with other Society books). One of these homes is the Tolman-Copeland-Waterman House at 18 Stetson Road. It is believed that this house (which is of Dutch Colonial style) was built by Benjamin Tolman at the time of his marriage to Elizabeth Palmer in 1709. Benjamin and Elizabeth had a daughter named Elizabeth who married Joseph Copeland in 1735. Joseph owned the Copeland Tannery (which may have had two locations—one on this side of River Street and another near Leonard Lane off of Common Street). The records of that business were meticulously recorded by Robert Eels (who married Benjamin and Elizabeth Tolman's other daughter, Ruth). The Copelands, and later the Watermans, were shipbuilders and tanners and continued to live in the home well into the 1900s. A tannery, by the way, is a messy business—turning animal hides into leather. Using water and tree bark (which contains tannins), many water pits (including the brook itself) were used to soak the hides. The Historical Society actually has some of the Waterman factory account books in their archives.

The Melzar Stetson home at 96 Stetson Road is another house meticulously archived in the *Historic Homesteads* book. In starting to describe this small cape-style house in the book, historian Quentin Coombs says "this house has a rare distinction among old houses in town... descent of a home through many generations of the builder's own family... as far back as 1650 or before." On the 1903 map of Norwell, the home is still in Stetson ownership. Melzar Stetson was the grandson of the first settler to Norwell that I mentioned before: Cornet Robert Stetson. Melzar was the son of Abner Stetson who built the home (still standing) on Meadow Farms Way off of Stetson Shrine Road (now

owned by Rick and Laura Brown). Melzar's uncle, Sgt. Samuel Stetson, built the house currently on the cul-de-sac at Stetson Shrine and soon to be placed in the Stetson Meadows Cemetery.

In 1803, Melzar Stetson married Clarissa Stetson (it was a small town...) and built the home on Stetson Road himself as he was a ship carpenter and had the skills. The home used to feature hand-made windows (each slightly different from the next) built by Melzar from hard-as-concrete, old-growth wood. The fireplace mantel is intricately carved, and the crown moldings and architectural details on the exterior are exquisite—clearly the work of a craftsman. Although the home is not large, it shows that antiques don't have to be large to be grand.

And now to talk about the home in which we stand. If you noticed, your invitation to this event called the Callahan's house "the Major Elias W. Pratt House, ca. 1821," and that is what was written on this home's Mass Historical Commission official form. That, however, is wrong—my mistake for reading the form and not looking at the sign on the house! A few years ago, Wendy asked Society house researcher Pam Basso to help her do research so she could get a historic home plaque, Pam and Wendy realized that this house is older than 1821—which was listed on the form. Pam was able to do deed research and went back to an owner of this property named William Briggs. So, the Callahan's house plaque says William Briggs, circa 1754 (and I'll explain in a minute where Pam got that date).

Wendy and Scott's house is a great lesson in how historical home research is done. We have maps of Norwell (or Scituate or South Scituate) that show houses and (sometimes) homeowners. The earliest map is from 1831, and shows home locations, but no names. The 1857 map and the 1879 map show homes and homeowner names. The 1903 map shows the shape of the houses and the location and shape of the outbuildings, along with the homeowner names.

This house appears on all of the maps—as far back as 1831. On the 1857 map, the homeowner is listed as E.W. Pratt. According to the book *Shipbuilding on the North River* by L. Vernon Briggs, "in 1819, William Copeland, Michael Ford, and Elias W. Pratt formed a partnership under the firm name of Copeland, Ford & Pratt." Briggs goes on to say "Major Elias W. Pratt came from some other town into Scituate. He married three times and had children by his first two wives..." and then it goes on to describe his offspring. What brought Major Pratt to Scituate? And who were his wives?

It wasn't until I read through the Briggs family genealogy later in that same book that I noticed this passage: "William Briggs was a shoemaker and yeoman and married, in 1754, Elizabeth Copeland, daughter of Joseph Copeland [probably the son of the Joseph referred to earlier as owning Copeland Tannery]. They had children: Rachel, Ruth, William, Elijah the shipbuilder, Lemuel, Elizabeth, John,

Charles, Cornelius and Hulda (who married Major Pratt). Hooray! Major Pratt came to Scituate to be a shipbuilder, married a local girl, and moved in with his in-laws.

In doing house research, we often date buildings in conjunction with two common events: marriages and deaths of parents. In other words, one builds a house when they get married or when they inherit when their parents or in-laws die.

Architectural research on this home shows that the back of the house with the kitchen fireplace was the original structure and built long before 1831. We dated this portion of the house circa 1754 (which was the time of William Briggs' marriage to Elizabeth Copeland). The front section of the house, however, is grander and newer than 1754. Our thought is that when William Briggs died in 1815, his daughter Hulda and son-in-law, Major Elias W. Pratt, probably built the larger home. Or perhaps the front section was built circa 1819 when Major Pratt began his lucrative shipbuilding partnership? House dating isn't always an exact science, but when the stories come together (like when I read that Major Pratt married the daughter of William Briggs), it can be fun!

The history of Norwell as a whole is wonderful, but sometimes neighbors need to know the history of the village immediately surrounding them. In Norwell, we have so many of these villages—Assinippi, Mount Blue, Ridge Hill, Church Hill... just to name a few. I, personally, think the history of Church Hill is one of the most fascinating!

I'm going to close with a quote from Quentin Coombs about his research on the Stetson/Church Hill area: "Here is a section of town, settled as early as any, where so many people together with their homesteads have come and gone, so much has happened only to fall back into the forgotten mists of time, that as fast as one lifts a corner of the curtain to solve a mystery, other faded images of what happened on the same spot even earlier appear beyond. The search has been exciting. As, one by one, pieces fitted together..."