



NORTH RIVER PACKET

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The Big Split of 1849: Exploring the Economic Rift That Created Norwell

2024 marks the 175th anniversary of our town's separation from Scituate. When the town of Scituate incorporated in 1636, it included today's Norwell, Hanover, and parts of Marshfield. Little by little geographic areas split from the original Old Scituate, including "South Scituate" in 1849.

by Dan Neumann

This year we celebrate the 175th anniversary of our town's independence! In 1849, the western and southern sections of Scituate separated and formed the new town of "South Scituate" (renamed "Norwell" in 1888).

At a town meeting, a list of reasons was offered for what would become known as "The Big Split." It would take less time to travel to a more local Town Meeting, for one, and the farmers of the western section had little in common with those in the coastal area, for another—the reasons were rather obvious and dull. But if breaking up is indeed "hard to do," then it would be logical to suspect that the separation

could have been rooted in some controversy, or dissension so deep that differences became irreconcilable. This raises the question—**what was the real catalyst for the split?**

It has been said that the "seeds of discord" may have been sown as early as the 17th century, when Scituate's Reverend Chauncy stirred controversy over his unusual administration of the sacraments. Chauncy practiced baptism by full immersion and offered communion only after dark. This prompted his parishioners to leave and form a new church upriver (now First Parish of Norwell). However, there is no evidence that this event played even a *small* part in the split—which occurred about two hundred years later.

The most likely catalyst for the rift was disagreement over finances, and it was directly related to major economic events happening at the national level. It may sound unheard of today, but in 1835, the U.S. government actually ran a budget *surplus* and paid off all of its debt. Under President Andrew Jackson, the federal government distributed the surplus to the states. By the time Massachusetts allocated Scituate's share—two years later—national economic conditions had flipped. The Panic of 1837 had begun and would last seven years.

This Panic was a financial crisis so deep that some observers wondered whether the country could survive intact. Violent riots broke out nationwide, disrupting social order. Forty percent of the nation's banks failed!

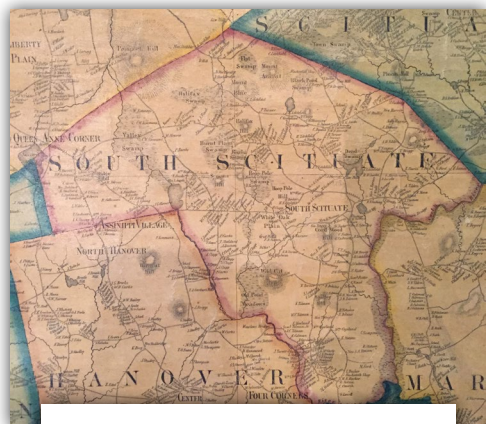
The crisis had its origins in rampant speculation on land and commodities.

“...the U.S. government actually ran a budget surplus and paid off all of its debt... distributing the surplus to the states.”

The country was young and growing at a breakneck pace. Money was flooding into the western fringes of the country to finance infrastructure projects. The railroads were the internet of the time, connecting people and places. There was a perception that easy profits could be made in lending and that the boom would be enduring. It was an earlier form of American “irrational exuberance.”

So, what does this have to do with Scituate? The local bank, run by the eminent Fogg family, was risk averse. It didn't engage in such speculation.

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The 1857 map of South Scituate—eight years after “The Big Split”

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.

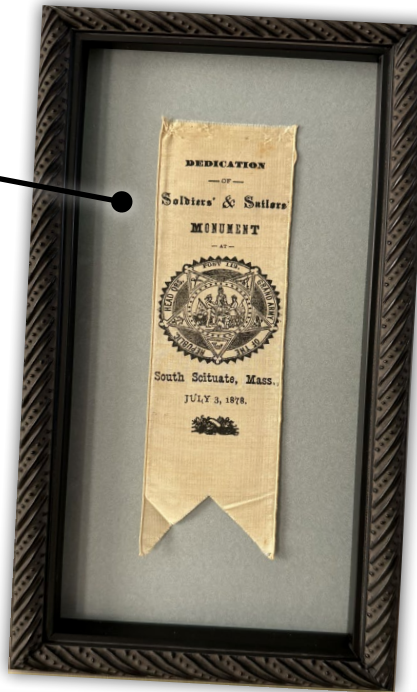
This photo of Sarah Spinney Torrey (1834-1915) was recently found in the Society Archives. Born in Boston, Sarah married Franklin Torrey of River Street in 1855. The Torreys moved to Italy soon after they married where Franklin began a marble exporting business. This photo was taken in Florence—clearly an inappropriate outfit for South Scituate/Norwell which, at the time, was mostly a farming/shoe making/small business community!

To learn more about the Torreys, you can watch actor Brett Holland's portrayal of Franklin Torrey at the 2021 First Parish Comes Alive! Cemetery Tour (linked below at right).



The Historical Society is looking to increase its collection of items related to our town's history. Typically we receive donations, but on occasion we must purchase especially important artifacts.

Thank you to Art Joseph for making us aware of this ribbon—worn by attendees celebrating the 1878 dedication of the Civil War monument on the Town Common. Purchased for \$130 and framed at The Frame Center in Hanover, it will now have a prominent place in our collection.



Use this QR code to view the [First Parish Comes Alive! video from 2021 that features a portrayal of Franklin Torrey](#), husband of Sarah Spinney Torrey (shown above).

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Just The Facts

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 3rd floor of the Sparrell School (322 Main Street) is open on Thursday mornings from 10:00 am until noon or by appointment.

Administrative Consultant

Rebecca Griffith

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
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Norwell, MA 02061
781-561-1161



DISCOVER MORE ONLINE!

Look for the magnifying glasses or the QR codes in this issue to discover more online.

History of the Grange #187

The Satuit branch of the Grange (No.187) was organized in 1890 with members from Norwell and surrounding towns to advance methods of agriculture and promote the social and economic needs of farmers. The Satuit Grange was the precursor to the current Norwell Grange (with its iconic building currently under restoration on Main Street).

by Janet Watson, Archivist

The first years of the Satuit Grange #187 are documented in the book of minutes kept by Secretary C. O. Ellms from August 28, 1890 through December 31, 1894. These records are stored in the Archives of the Norwell Historical Society.

Secretary Ellms recorded his observations in ornate script with illustrative detail offering a wonderful glimpse into the lives of South Scituate's farmers in the late 1800s when everything was in flux economically and socially for the farming community.

The Grange was a secret society with passwords, degrees, and elaborate rituals to which all branches were expected to conform. Secretary Ellms starts his minutes by saying the Grange opened "in the usual form" and we can assume by consulting the Grange manual that the opening went something like this:

Master: The hour of labor has arrived and the work of another day demands our attention. Let each repair to his or her allotted station. Worthy Overseer, are all present correct?

Overseer: Worthy Steward, you will ascertain.

Steward: My Assistants will make examination and report.

Overseer: Worthy Master/President, We find all present correct.

When the Satuit Grange began, meetings were held at private homes. Eventually they were moved to Fogg

Hall (above the bank in Norwell Center) which was rented for \$1/night—lighted and heated.

Fogg Hall was on the second floor of the South Scituate Savings Bank and Fogg Store, built in 1884 and serving the town as a public meeting place until 1921. It was located at the current site of Coastal Heritage Bank.



One complaint about Fogg Hall was the insufficiency of lamps. This was addressed by the management, but the rental of the hall was then increased by 50¢. The records document the group's purchase of furniture from another secret society, the Chevaliers of Pythias [see inset below]. They also purchased a piano at the cost of \$190 (\$40 down and \$5/month). The piano was then rented for \$1.50 to \$2.50 to offset the expense.

Chevaliers of Pythias

A fraternal organization founded in Boston 1888 as a charitable and benevolent society with optional sick and death benefits. Apparently defunct by the late 1890s, including the Norwell Chapter.

Much of the business portion of the meeting had to do with nomination and approval of new members and the

status of dues collection, which were often in arrears.

When the National Grange was founded in 1867, it made history by admitting women on an equal footing with men, and women were active participants in the Satuit Grange. At the close of 1892, there were a total of 47 members, 27 males and 20 females. At the close of 1894, membership had increased to 62 members: 35 males and 27 females.

The Grange was founded for the betterment of its members not only in farming, but also in their personal growth and development. Sometimes the meeting program consisted of discussions of a pre-chosen topic, and members were expected to be ready to speak no matter how reluctant they might be. Excuses made by members who didn't want to participate were duly noted by Secretary Ellms. Topics included such things as the best newspaper for farmers to subscribe to, immigration, whether a married or unmarried farmer was more likely to be successful, whether men or women were better managers, and who should pay for road expenses (the town or the state).

Programs often focused on farming techniques such as raising sweet corn, raising potatoes, a comparison of current farming with early farming, horticultural education in the schools, and how farmers could band together to stop the exploitation of the agricultural sector by monopolies and middlemen. The *New England Farmer* reported in 1895 "At the Satuit grange October 3rd the members brought fruit and vegetables, and each gave an account of the method of production, and discussion of much interest."

The Grange meetings were also recreational and opportunities to socialize that must have been highly

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“The Big Split,” cont’d.

(continued from page 1)

Scituate’s farmers and other tradespeople operated in a somewhat closed economic system. The town was relatively insulated from the crisis. However, the inhabitants of the town were by no means insular. Information on current events was disseminated, discussed, and debated (often heatedly) at the general store—it was the center of activity.

John King Nash ran the general store at the time, located adjacent to the town common in present day Norwell. He would have undoubtedly been exposed to the political debates that took place. It was Nash who was the first to formally call for the division of the town. He was also the town treasurer and was conservative when it came to financial matters. His response to the town’s planned usage of the federal surplus reflected the economic and political divide of the time. The town intended to lend the funds equally to each inhabitant at a negligible interest rate of 0.1%. Nash and his group were adamantly opposed, deeming it illegal. It is likely that this issue prompted Nash to file the petition to separate from Scituate in 1839.

Amid the national turmoil, there was bitter dispute over economic policy.

Massachusetts, a Whig himself, didn’t intend for the money to be used in this way,” Nash must have thought. Interestingly, Senator Daniel Webster was a frequent visitor to the Nash Store. Webster was one of the founding members of the Whig Party and was known as a great orator. Visiting the store on his way to and from his country home in Marshfield, he must have had a tremendous influence on Nash and the townsfolk.

On the other side of the political divide was the radical faction of the Democratic Party called the “Locofocos,” and some were active in the Scituate area. They were fanatical in their belief that there should be a more equitable distribution of wealth in the country. They were also known

Scituate’s share of the federal surplus was \$7,444, which is equivalent to about \$250,000 today. With a population of about 4,000 people, it only amounted to \$63/person (in today’s money). So why the fuss?

Maybe it was the principle. Seen another way, the amount received was roughly equivalent to the town’s total annual revenue. Not unlike today, the lion’s share of town expenses was related to schools (there were 21 local school districts in all of Scituate then!). The federal surplus would have covered a little over two years’ worth of school spending. So, in aggregate, it was quite a meaningful sum. The town went back and forth several times on how it intended to use the funds. It considered lending to the state, personal loans, mortgages, and paying off debt, before ultimately settling on equal payment to the inhabitants.

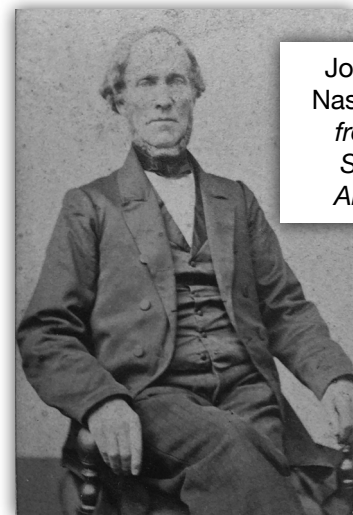
The controversy then appeared to settle down and the effort to divide the town went dark, inexplicably, for eight years. What began as a “Whig-out” seemed to flame-out.



Locofoco matches were the inspiration for the nickname of the Democratic Party

for their distrust of the banks and their paper money. They were called Locofocos because that is the type of match they lit when their political opponents turned off the gas lights at a meeting in New York City. Evidence of their local influence is found in a letter written by Scituate resident Nathaniel Holmes Morison to his friend in 1839. In it, he states

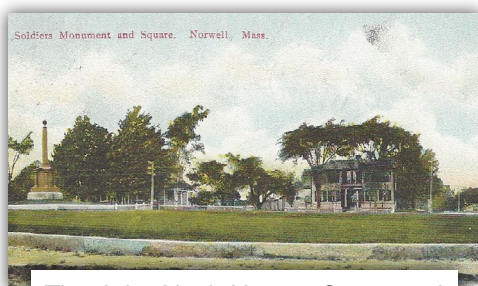
“there is a project on foot to divide the town, which will probably take place. The inhabitants, though professing to be Whigs, are Locofocos in the most radical sense and voted a meeting recently held for the purpose to divide their portion of the surplus equally among all inhabitants. This has occasioned the division among them, and started the project of division.”



John King Nash, photo from the Society Archives

Then, in 1847, the town agreed to call in all the notes held against the inhabitants and pay off debt with funds available in the treasury. Things were finally going Nash’s way. A year later, in 1848, a 19-member committee was formed, including Nash, to consider “the expediency of a division of the town.” Nash was also reelected as Treasurer. We don’t know why the pendulum suddenly swung back in his

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The John Nash House, Store, and Post Office sat directly across from the Town Green.

Nash was probably a member of the Whig political party, which supported the national bank, believed in limited presidential power, and importantly, advocated for a meritocratic socio-economic system. A Whig would have chafed at Scituate’s proposal to lend to each person equally without realistically considering their ability to repay. “Surely the governor of

“The Big Split,” cont’d.

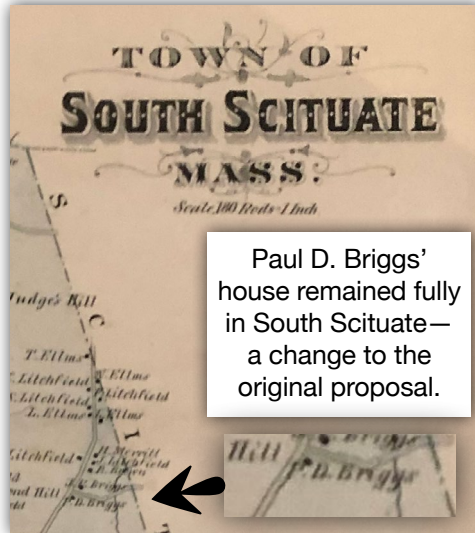
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favor, but we do know that this time the idea of division was serious, so much so that it was said that people became “obsessed” with it.

There was some opposition to the separation. Galen Damon filed a counter petition with 58 others, stating that division would “increase expenses, sacrifice town property, and disarrange school districts.” Several other counter petitions were filed to challenge the proposed boundary line, but not the idea of separation itself. Paul Dean Briggs was adamantly opposed because his house sat on the proposed dividing line (154 Summer Street, at the intersection of First Parish Road in present day Norwell). He was so upset that he was said to have left a meeting quite abruptly. Thereafter, the dip in the road along that section of the dividing line was referred to as “purgatory.”

Notwithstanding Briggs’ understandable opposition, the process was said to have proceeded rather amicably. To prevent disputes, a so-called

“disinterested committee” of three individuals from neighboring towns was established to ensure that the





boundary line was drawn fairly. It appears striking today that the town would entrust “outsiders” to make such an important decision, but it did work. They came from neighboring Hingham, Marshfield and Cohasset.

On February 14, 1849, nearly ten years after Nash’s original petition,

Massachusetts Governor Briggs signed the act to create the new town of South Scituate. The first town meeting was held a month later, where officers were chosen. The first selectmen of the town were Ebenezer T. Fogg, Loring Jacobs, Samuel Tolman, Abial Turner, and Samuel A. Turner. To this day, 175 years later, the town remains under solid stewardship. Norwell’s municipal bonds are rated AAA, the highest possible level (of note, Scituate is one notch lower at AA).

Our town was birthed in controversy and emerged strong, setting the tone for the type of sound management that would make John Nash proud. 🍃

Interested in learning more about The Big Split? The Society is [sponsoring a talk at the NPL](#) on Wed., Nov. 20th at 6:30. Use the QR code at right to sign up.



The Norwell Historical Society lost two members recently—both of whom contributed greatly to our organization. We are saddened by the loss, but know their legacies will live on in the Society Archives with their writings, videos, and artifacts.

Patricia Davis Hainer
age 85
passed away on
September 11, 2024

Although beginning her career as an artist, Pattie was best known to all as the Town Reporter for both the Norwell Mariner and the Patriot Ledger.

Pattie’s groundbreaking research on the history of the Black community in Old Scituate (including today’s Norwell) is a cornerstone in the Society’s collection. The epitaph of that work is especially poignant (see the quote below).



Robert L. Molla, Jr.
age 89
passed away on
December 21, 2023

A Norwell resident his entire life, Bob dedicated much of his life to town service as a volunteer firefighter, Water Commissioner, North River Commissioner, and as a member of the South Shore Regional Vocational Technical School Committee. A Historical Society video interview with Bob discussing his life in town will be released soon.

“It is terribly important that the “small things forgotten” be remembered. For in the seemingly little and insignificant things that accumulate to create a lifetime, the essence of our existence is captured. We must remember these bits and pieces, and we must use them in new and imaginative ways so that a different appreciation for what life is today, and was in the past, can be achieved.”

Pattie Hainer, *Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverances: The Black Community of Scituate-Norwell, 1628–1800*

Dr. Jacobs Takes “The Cure”

Dr. Henry Barton Jacobs, the last Jacobs’ family member to own the Jacobs Farm, was a physician who specialized in research on tuberculosis, a disease which took his younger brother at age 34. Throughout the 1800s it was thought that tuberculosis was constitutional, not contagious. Eventually doctors realized it was a respiratory illness spread through airborne droplets, but the disease thrived in cities like Baltimore, where Jacobs and his wife lived. Given Dr. Jacobs’ knowledge of TB, one must wonder if “taking the cure” was medicinal or recreational in nature!

by Janet Watson

While cleaning out the Jacobs Farmhouse, the Historical Society was delighted—if a little overwhelmed—to find hundreds of letters saved by Frances Jacobs, the last Jacobs family member to live at the Jacobs Farmhouse.

Many of the letters were written by Mrs. Jacobs’ son, Dr. Henry Barton Jacobs, who married the fabulously wealthy Mary Sloane Frick Garrett and subsequently went on to live a Gilded Age lifestyle with mansions in Newport and Baltimore and yearly trips to Europe.

Here are some excerpts from two letters that Henry wrote to his mother in Assinippi in July 1902. He was corresponding from Royat, France where he and his wife Mary were taking the “cure.”

Royat, France

Royat is a town in central France, southeast of Paris. Located on the foothills of the volcanos overlooking Clermont-Ferrand, it is known for its thermal springs that were appreciated by both the Romans and Napoleon. Royat remains a spa town today.

The letters almost always contain an account of letters sent and letters received because in the days before the telephone, it frequently took ten days or more for letters to traverse the Atlantic. Henry’s letters often express anxiety for the well-being of his mother who, at the time, was a 74-year old widow living at the Farmhouse. The caretaker of the Jacobs Farm, George Turner, also lived on the property with his family, as did Mrs. Jacobs’ companion Miss Wade, and her cook and housekeeper Mrs. Richardson.

The Society is grateful to Beccie Allen, John Gallagher, Peter Kates and Caitlin Monaco—the volunteers who are transcribing the letters from their original elaborate cursive handwriting.

*Grand Hotel, Royat France
3 July 1902, Thursday*

My dearest Mother,

I think I am getting all your letters regularly now and indeed in counting them out I am not sure that I have missed any but at the first they seemed so long in coming that I thought you could not be writing me often. I don’t understand why you do not get my letters for I have written twice a week since coming away excepting on two occasions when Mary substituted a letter for me. My first letter was from the steamer mailed at Queenstown, my next from London and so on without exception through the weeks that have passed.

I hope July is going to give you some good weather for getting out and sitting in the garden or under the tree so that you may enjoy the warm sun. ...You speak of caterpillars—I am very glad to hear of the heavy leafage and I hope the Elm has come out this year in its old good shape.

The walks ...are one of the most delightful features of this little place. In five minutes after leaving the hotel we get up the hillside away from houses into little rural paths which run here and there among the grapes, wheat, rye, strawberries and other little patches of garden vegetables which cover every inch of the ground. For not a spot the size of a handkerchief is allowed to go uncultivated. The old peasants are always at work in these

gardens and their presence as we wander along makes this walk all the more interesting. This is preeminently a country of cherries and just now they are ripe and being gathered on all sides. Little cherry trees scattered all over the hillsides are loaded with fruit ...and it is a great pleasure to me as we go along to sample a few from the lower limbs... I wish I might send you a few of the very good ones.

*Ever lovingly,
your Henry*

I inclose [sic] cheque for \$50 for George, wages to July 12. Please hand it to him -H.

Thomas Lawson’s Dreamwold Estate in Scituate, photo from the Scituate Historical Society



July 10, 1902

My dearest Mother,

I have just received two very delightful letters from you dated Thursday and Sunday, June 26 and 29... What you said of the improvements of Lawson was also very interesting. He is really making a decided and happy change in the surroundings of old North Scituate, apparently he has no end of money and so long as he spends it upon beautifying those old huckleberry pastures he is surely making good use of it. How attractive his fence will be when the roses get grown and cover it with their beautiful crimson blossoms.

I have no news to write. We are sedulously taking the cure drinking the waters and taking the baths, and in addition I am having a hot steam of water squirted on my shoulder every morning.

*Ever yours most affectionately,
Henry*



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_____ Researching at the Archives _____ Other:

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_____ Farmhouse Tour Guide

_____ Farmhouse Maintenance

_____ Event Planning

_____ Photography/Digitalization



Grange, cont'd.

(continued from page 3)

valued by farmers in the small local towns where there was little other entertainment. Meetings included recitations, music and humorous stories performed by members.

The minutes of February 19, 1891 say that the meeting was so entertaining that it was voted to meet once a week. The subsequent three weeks Secretary Ellms wrote unhappily that the meetings were cancelled due to the lack of a quorum, so the group resumed their monthly schedule.

The meetings for the installation of officers were especially elaborate. The installation meeting of January 7, 1892 included a mandolin performance by Anna Croning, a song by Effie Crowell, a solo by Miss Manone accompanied by the organ, and the presentation of "Driving Home the Cows"—a haunting poem about a boy who went off to the Civil War recited from memory by Elsie Bray. After the entertainment, the members were invited to refreshments of oysters, coffee, and cake. The minutes close:

"After a season of enjoyment in disposing of the edibles, the time arrived for the closing scene, that of dancing."

The Satuit grange began the tradition of Strawberry Festivals, later carried on for many years by the Historical Society. In May 1891, the minutes

record the formation of a committee to plan the Strawberry Festival. The tickets included strawberries, ice cream, and cake and cost 20¢. The ticket price in 1892 was raised to 25¢ with an extra 5¢ for dancing.

The meetings usually started at 8:00 pm (rather late in the evening by our modern meeting standards) and on occasion lasted until after midnight. The meetings were rarely cancelled due to bad weather, and one can imagine the members traveling home by horse and buggy or perhaps even walking from the Town Center on cold nights without the benefit of street lamps.

Creative suppers were often served (i.e., a dinner where all the dishes were made of corn). Outings were organized and Secretary Ellms wrote of plans made for a beach picnic at Brant Rock and the rental of a Tally Ho coach to take members to the Brockton Fair. The brothers and sisters looked in on members who were ill and collectively attended the funerals of members who passed away.

Unlike minutes of most organizations that can be tediously pro forma, Secretary Ellms had a literary flourish. Even the usual note about the adjournment of the meeting, appears here as:


"Time which travels along regardless of anyone admonished us that the hour of departure was at hand."

This book of minutes ends in 1894 when the organization was still active and growing. By 1899, however, the Satuit Grange's entry in the Massachusetts Grange state report was

"The Grange has not been very prosperous the last year. ...Since summer vacation we have not had but a few meetings. I do not think the outlook is very bright at present..."

The 1902 state report announced,

"I am sorry to report that I found the Satuit Grange to be in a dormant condition having had an auction and sold out all their property."

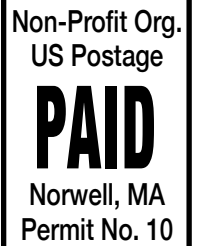
Why did the organization go dormant in 1902? Perhaps the original membership was getting older or uninterested. Perhaps farming was on the decline in Norwell. Whatever the reason, there was no Grange in Norwell until October 1939 when the Norwell Grange No. 410 was organized, which remains active today and is in the process of renovating the historic Norwell Grange Building on Main Street. 

To learn more about
or to donate to
the [Norwell
Grange #410](#),
use the QR
code at right.





NORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P.O. Box 693
Norwell, Massachusetts 02061
www.norwellhistoricalsociety.org



RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Fall 2024

Upcoming Events

For an up-to-date listing of events, please see the Society website [“Events”](#) page or use the QR code at right.



Annual Meeting & “The History of the North River” Presentation by Kezia Bacon

5:30–7:00 pm at the Norwell Public Library, 64 South Street

Wed., October 16th

The North River is the first Scenic Protected River in Massachusetts, and the North and South Rivers are designated a National Natural Landmark by the National Park Service. ([See this Society newsletter article on the battle!](#)). This presentation by Kezia Bacon of the North and South Rivers Watershed Association is an overview of the natural events that lead to what the rivers are today, including a brief history of the shipbuilding industry from the mid-1600's to the mid-1800's. The event includes a Meet & Greet at 6:00, Annual Meeting at 6:15, North River Presentation at 6:30, and a Q&A at 7:30. All are welcome to this free event, but the Norwell Public Library would like attendees to [register in advance](#).

First Parish Cemetery Comes Alive! Tour

noon to 3:00 pm at the First Parish Cemetery in Norwell Center

Sat., October 26st (Rain Date: Oct. 27th)

Join the Norwell Historical Society for its 5th annual re-enactment tour at First Parish Cemetery. Actors will portray a variety of historic individuals who are buried in the graveyard—telling their personal stories to small groups. Sign up using the QR code above to visit the Events page on the Society website. A suggested donation of \$15/adult is being requested of all who are able.

Celebration of “The Big Split!”

6:30 to 7:45 pm at the Norwell Public Library, 64 South Street

Wed., November 20th

175 years ago, in 1849, the residents of today's Norwell decided to break away from the Town of Scituate and become “South Scituate.” Why did this break away happen? Learn more about the division and celebrate the occasion with a birthday cake! Advanced registration through the NPL is recommended.

Christmas at the Farmhouse

Jacobs Farmhouse, 4 Jacobs Lane

Sat., December 14th

The Norwell Historical Society will have exclusive access to the Jacobs property this day and, weather permitting, will provide tours of the Carriage House and Cider Room. Come celebrate the holidays with a tour of the festively-decorated museum! All are welcome!