



NORTH RIVER PACKET



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Store of Stores: The Source of Henry Norwell's Fortune

Henry Norwell is well known as the benefactor whose generosity was honored in 1888 when South Scituate adopted his name. This is the often-overlooked story of the business that generated his wealth.

by Dan Neumann

FROM SCOTLAND TO AMERICA

Today, Erroll, Scotland is a small, unassuming village situated 50 miles north of Edinburgh and surrounded by farmland. When Henry Norwell was born there in 1832, it would have had a similar look and feel. Both his father and grandfather were tailors there, serving the tightly knit local community. Henry's profession would have been preordained, but he must have known at an early age that his ambitious spirit could not be satisfied in such a place.

When he was just 14, Henry Norwell left Erroll to embark on a career as a dry goods merchant, one that ultimately took him to Boston where he co-founded a major dry goods store that grew to occupy nearly an entire city block.

The first stop on his professional career path was Limerick, Ireland, where Henry entered a five-year apprenticeship with the prominent dry goods firm, William Todd, & Co. During this time, he focused on ribbons and lace, rising to become a buyer and a manager in that department. For the rest of his life, this area of the trade would define him, even though he would later become responsible for a much wider array of dry goods. In his obituary, Henry Norwell was described as an "expert judge in silks and laces."

Coincidentally, his time in Limerick

overlapped with the Irish Famine. It would have undoubtedly been an extremely challenging time to operate any business, especially for purveyors of fancier fare like silks and laces. Nevertheless, Henry appeared to prosper in his position and decided to "push his fortune" in America. He earned a glowing letter of recommendation from William Todd himself:

"Mr. Norwell leaves us now with the intention of pushing his fortune in America. We wish him all success, and have no doubt but that he will prove a valuable acquisition to any one fortunate enough to engage his services."

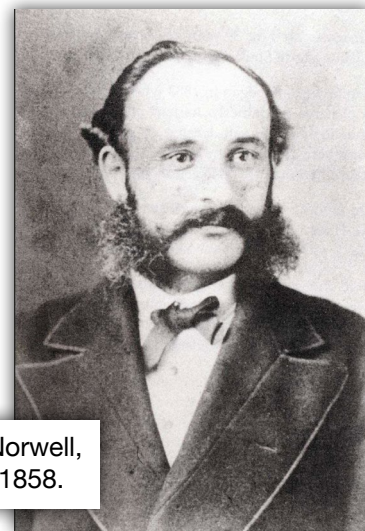
It is unclear how much the famine contributed to Henry's decision to emigrate, but it was certainly the driving factor for the masses of people facing starvation. About one million Irish emigrated to the US during that time, seeking better opportunities in a country that was growing rapidly to the west.

THE DRY GOODS INDUSTRY

The dry goods business thrived in mid-19th century America. The massive wave of immigration from Ireland and elsewhere contributed to a trend of urbanization, enabling merchants to build very large stores that sold a variety of "dry" goods, including textiles, needles, thread, hats, gloves, soaps, upholstery, and more.

These early dry goods stores didn't sell many ready-to-wear garments. Most apparel was actually made at home with the help of a Singer sewing machine, invented in 1851 and sold widely.

The diversity of items sold in the larger stores made good business sense. Deep price discounts in certain



Henry Norwell,
circa 1858.

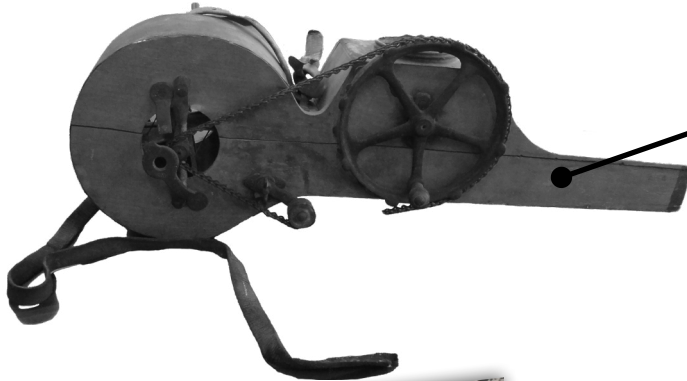
areas would bring customers in the door, introducing them to other higher margin products. Merchants could use their scale to source wholesale goods at a lower cost. The growth of the railroads dramatically improved the efficiency of the supply chain. With this strong backdrop, large dry goods houses were popping up in all the major cities, and many strove to outdo each other with glamorous buildings and creative ways to attract shoppers.

It was a ripe time and place for an eager young man like Henry Norwell to seek

(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.



Former Norwell Conservation Agent Nancy Hemingway donated this tool to the Historical Society years ago, and its purpose has remained a mystery. Whether or not you like AI, it was helpful in identifying the tool (which was featured at a Society display at the Norwell Community Market this summer). It is hand-cranked crop duster used to evenly distribute powdered fertilizer or pesticides. The leather strap on the bottom left was used to put the device around your shoulder. Unfortunately, after handling and demonstrating the duster to many passers-by, we learned that arsenic was a popular pesticide. Thankfully, a kind doctor reassured us that there was no imminent danger!



Another gem donated by the Mesheau family, this photo shows the Torrey Mill. According to historian Joseph Merritt, the sawmill was located on Mill Lane and built around 1800. The dam was built on the location of an old beaver dam!

Recently donated by the family of Carol & John Mesheau, this photo (circa late 1800s) shows the Morton Farm (known today as the Stetson-Ford House). This Town-owned property is one of the few houses in Norwell on the National Register of Historic Places. Both barns in the forefront of the photo are no longer on the property.



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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

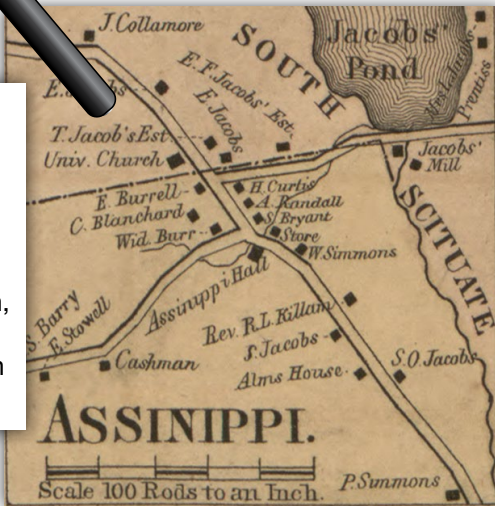
The Norwell Historical Society
P.O. Box 693
Norwell, MA 02061
781-561-1161



DISCOVER MORE ONLINE!

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

The 1857 Walling map of South Scituate has an Assinippi inset (shown here) which notes the Universalist Church, the Hanover Almshouse, and an "Assinippi Hall."



What's in a Name: ASSINIPPI

How did this section of Norwell/Hanover get its name?

For tens of thousands of years, the Massachusetts and Wampanoag tribes occupied the area that we today call Norwell/Hanover. The Third Herring Brook is one of the boundaries between the two towns. The brook (which runs from Valley Swamp to the North River) was called "Assinippi" by these Natives. Translated from Algonquian (the language spoken by both tribes) "Assinippi" means "rocky water."

Why is Assinippi partly in Norwell and partly in Hanover?

In 1727, the Town of Hanover separated from Scituate, and the Town of Norwell remained part of the larger "Old Scituate" until 1849. So prior to 1727, Assinippi was a village fully in one town, the Town of Scituate.

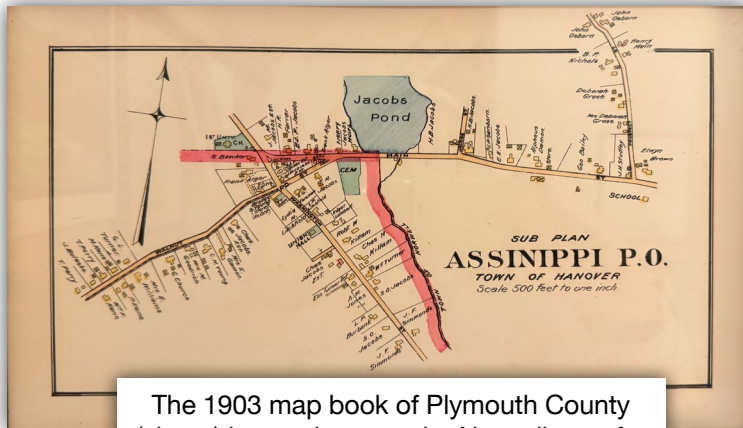
Why is Assinippi a village at all?

Villages were distinct for two primary reasons: a post office and a church. The Assinippi post office was located on the corner of Route 123 and Route 53 (next door to the former Land Rover dealer). But letters found at the Jacobs Farmhouse often are addressed to "Accord, Mass." Not sure why!

In 1766, the village of Assinippi (encompassing both Hanover and Scituate) petitioned the "south parish" (what is today First Parish of Norwell) to be "set off," according to Rev. Samuel Deane. Finding the record of the request, Deane notes "It was put to a vote whether the precinct would grant the request of a number of inhabitants in the westerly part of the precinct... [to be] a precinct by themselves..." but the request was denied. Finally in 1792, Rev. Barnes of today's First Parish acquiesced and agreed to preach in the Assinippi precinct on the second Sabbath of each month. It wasn't until 1812 that the "Assinippi Universalist Church" was built and the area would be have its own church building.

What families lived in Assinippi?

The Jacobs and Collamore families were the primary early residents of the area, owning large farms surrounding Jacobs Pond. In the early 1940s, William Collamore sold his large farm on the shores of the pond to a developer who created "Jacobs Lake Shores." Described by the *South Shore Times* as "100 lots set up for sale, and small homes of excellent quality... much of the original oak and maple forest remains..." (See an ad for the cottages at left)



The 1903 map book of Plymouth County (above) has an inset on the Norwell map for the town center, but asks readers to refer to the Hanover map for the inset of Assinippi.

1 Estate For Sale

Real Estate For Sale

Real Estate For Sale

Real Estate For Sale

t

Take Advantage of Today's Low Prices. All Labor and Material Cost Increasing Daily.

ONLY 12 MILES FROM QUINCY

JACOBS LAKE SHORES

NORWELL, MASS.

Wise people are now taking advantage of present low prices. During the past few weeks many thinking people have taken advantage of present low prices. These people are making plans for their future summers at prices and terms they can afford to pay. Don't be one that puts things off until tomorrow and then regrets it. ACT NOW. You can own an attractive cottage with a small down payment and terms that will suit the most limited budget.



MODEL COTTAGE

DONT DELAY
ACT NOW

TO REACH PROPERTY
Take Route 3 from Quincy, Continue for 12 miles to Norwell. Watch for large sign on left reading:
ENTRANCE JACOBS LAKE SHORES

Newly Built
Model
Cottages

\$795 - \$845 - \$945

\$100 Down—\$16 Monthly

5 ROOM CAPE COD
YEAR ROUND HOME
All Improvements

\$300 Down—\$35 Monthly
Includes All Costs
BEAUTIFUL WOODED
LOTS

As low as \$89

\$10 Down—\$5 Monthly

Sensible Restrictions Are
Your Protection

Bathing — Boating
Fishing

150 families now at Jacobs
Lake shores.

This is ample proof of the desirability of this popular Lake Resort. The short distance from Quincy over an excellent highway (Route 8) the real country atmosphere, the type of neighbors, and the beautiful lake, were a few of the many attractions that encouraged these families to locate at Jacobs Lake Shores.



MODEL COTTAGE

DRIVE OUT
THIS WEEKEND

Henry Norwell, cont'd.

(continued from page 1)

his fortune. At the age of 22 in 1854, he stepped off the boat in New York and immediately proceeded to Amboy, Illinois (located about 100 miles west of Chicago). There Henry joined a cousin who ran a general store. His hopes were dashed, though. Unimpressed with what he considered a backwater, he left after only six months. Amboy, like Errol, was ill suited to fulfill Henry Norwell's aspirations.

THE MOVE TO NEW ENGLAND

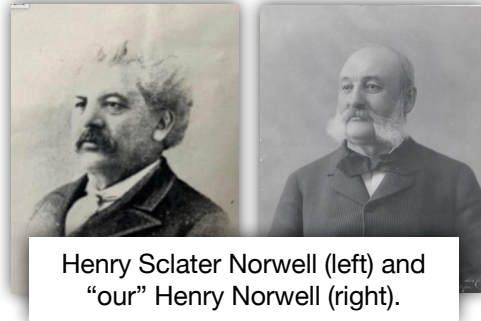
He quickly found employment with David M. Kinmonth & Co., a leading dry goods merchant in Boston. Henry spent two and a half years there as manager of the ribbon department. It was during this time that he met and married Hannah Chandler Merritt of South Scituate. Hannah Merritt was from a well-to-do family and 14 years Henry's senior, perhaps a good match for a driven man with a mature vision.

Very soon after their wedding (held at First Parish Church in South Scituate), Henry left Boston to start his own dry goods store in Nashua, New Hampshire. Given the quick timing, he may have come into some money through his marriage, seeding at least part of his new venture.

It is said that he started the business with \$3,000 of merchandise and \$1,000 in capital. In the first year, he generated \$30,000 in sales, growing to \$100,000 in a just a few years. It was here, in Nashua, that Henry first made his mark as a true entrepreneur.

HENRY SCLATER NORWELL

Remarkably, there was another dry goods merchant also named Henry Norwell who operated a major store in Nashua, New Hampshire, though at a later time. This man, also from Scotland (Glasgow), had the middle name "Sclater," and even shared the same birth and death years as our own Henry Norwell. Henry Sclater came to America in 1861 (two to three years after our Henry Norwell launched his store). They overlapped there for a few more years. Henry Sclater then moved to Chicago, only to lose his



Henry Sclater Norwell (left) and "our" Henry Norwell (right).

entire business in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Undeterred, Henry Sclater returned to Nashua, after our Henry Norwell had left and started a successful dry goods store.

The natural question is whether Henry Sclater Norwell and our Henry Norwell were related. It would appear likely, but proving that will require a genealogist skilled in Scottish genealogical records.

Given their commonalities, including a similar portrait, it was hard not to wonder at first whether they were in fact the same person. They were indeed different, but the suspicion was stoked by a separate fact that our Henry Norwell did live a double life.

HENRY NORWELL'S WIVES

The 1880 federal census reports Henry Norwell living in two different places with two different families. In South Scituate, he is listed as a dry goods merchant living with his wife, Hannah Merritt Norwell, and no children. However, in the same year, he is also listed as a dry goods merchant residing in New York City with a spouse named Ellen J. Norwell and two children.

We know that Henry maintained an office on Broadway in lower Manhattan, where he conducted wholesale operations in his dry goods business, so there was a legitimate front for his ruse. The whole affair was maintained right up until Hannah Merritt Norwell's death in 1887. Shortly after, Henry Norwell formally married Ellen (nee Lewis) and moved her from New York to his house in South Scituate, a postmortem insult to Hannah, who grew up in their family home.

Seemingly nobody caught on and just one year later, in 1888, South Scituate honored Henry by renaming itself

"Norwell." Had his bigamy been known, the town might have chosen one of the other names under consideration: Hatherly, Standish, or Cushing.

Henry's commitment to donate \$2,500 per year for ten years for the upkeep of roads was the official reason for the renaming. In aggregate, it's equivalent to about \$875,000 today—a healthy sum.

“Had his bigamy been known, the town might have chosen one of the other names under consideration: Hatherly, Standish, or Cushing.”

SHEPARD NORWELL

By this time, Henry had become quite wealthy, with properties in Florida and 140 acres of oceanfront in the Egypt section of Scituate. Most of that wealth was generated from his ownership in The Shepard Norwell Store.

Following his stint in Nashua, Henry moved back to Boston in 1864 to partner with another established dry goods merchant, John Shepard. Together, they purchased all the stock of White, Wilcox, & Co. on Winter Street in Boston and renamed the business Shepard Norwell & Co.



An image of the Shepard Norwell & Co. store in Boston from a receipt in the Society Archives.

(continued on page 5)

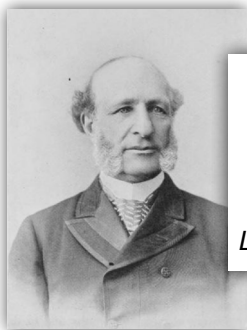
Henry Norwell, cont'd.

(continued from page 4)

This location was the nucleus for what would become one of Boston's largest stores, ultimately taking up nearly an entire city block along Tremont and Winter Streets, across from today's Park Street T station. This part of Boston was transitioning from an upscale residential area to a center for shopping. It had been known as Bannisters Lane, named after an English settler who owned land in the center of Boston during the 17th century. Many prominent Boston families and a large number of professional men (doctors, dentists, etc.) owned stately homes here. In fact, the site of The Shepard Norwell Store was originally the location of Samuel Adams' house.

Henry's own residential address was just across Boston Common at 6 Walnut Street in Beacon Hill. This was his primary residence, and the house in South Scituate was his summer getaway.

John Shepard, like Henry, got started in the business very young. At the age of 11, he worked in a Boston drug store kept by J.W. Snow. Two years later, he was employed in the dry goods store of J.A. Jones. At age 19 he was in business for himself, eventually establishing the



John Shepard, as seen in *Men of Progress: 1,000 Biographical Sketches*. Source: Library of Congress

firm of John Shepard & Co. In 1861, he bought out Bell, Thing, & Co., which was located in today's Government Center area.

As his business grew, John Shepard moved his store to the burgeoning shopping district on Winter Street. By the time John and Henry formed Shepard, Norwell & Co. in 1864, they had a combined experience of 37 years—they were roughly equal in age, experience, and drive.

Billing itself as “the store of stores,” the Shepard Norwell Store treated each department like a small specialty shop within the larger parent store.

Fixed pricing was implemented widely among the large dry goods stores of the time, including Shepard Norwell. Unworried about haggling, customers could expect a very comfortable, inviting setting. Visiting the store, with its richly decorated interior and restaurant, was considered a special event.

The earliest employees were men, but that changed over time. Quality service was emphasized almost fanatically, with the hope of creating loyal customers. Thus, the forerunners of the modern-day department store were born. The eventual moniker of “department store” wasn't widely used until well into the 20th century.

HEADY GROWTH

Business at Shepard Norwell grew so quickly that the store underwent several major renovations and expansions. The original store had only one floor, with residential apartments above. An advertisement in 1884 announced the completion of a major expansion:

“They have now one of the most convenient and best arranged stores in the country, and the best lighted store in America.”

Another expansion in 1887 allowed for the ground and second floors to be wholly devoted to retail customers, the third and fourth to wholesale trade, and the fifth to upholstery and manufacturing departments.

The messaging was careful. “They Were Forced to do IT” was the title of another advertisement. Expansion, they said, was necessary to accommodate brisk customer demand and to uphold their high standards of service.

In 1891, an adjoining chapel building associated with St. Paul's Episcopal Church was torn down and moved to the top floor of the store and renamed “St. Paul's Annex.” A newspaper article stated:

“The space vacated in the old building, in order to avail of the

new addition, has made possible an extension of the hosiery, and smallwares, laces, blankets and cottons departments, each of which badly needed the room.”

Many other expansions followed until the store ultimately occupied a massive footprint bounded by Tremont Street, Winter Street, Washington Street, and Temple Place. The tallest part of the store had eight stories, in addition to a functional basement.



The large scale of the business enabled the company to endure periods of economic hardship. For instance, when the Tariff of 1890 raised the average duty on US imports to almost 50%, it had the effect of raising retail prices for customers (sound familiar?) threatening sales. The Shepard Norwell Store, along with other major importers of consumer goods, fought the implementation of the tariff vigorously, but failed. Smaller retailers without sophisticated supply chains were impacted more. The larger stores like Shepard Norwell & Co. thrived overall, capitalizing fully on the new class of shopper christened by the Gilded Age.

From its first year in business until the end of the 19th century, the store's sales increased tenfold. Jordan Marsh, which was said to be New England's largest store, also capitalized on the strong economic trend. It was located just down the street from Shepard Norwell, at the corner of Washington and Summer Streets, then known as Shuman's Corner (now occupied by Macy's).

(continued on page 7)

Society Annual Meeting Features Talk on Charles Turner, Jr.

From climbing Katahdin to battling Britain in Congress, Charles Turner Jr. was the War Hawk Massachusetts tried to forget—until now. Join the Society at its 90th Annual Meeting and learn about this Winter Street resident who helped change the course of a young nation.

by Karl Swenson

This month the Norwell Historical Society will welcome Professor James Goode for a captivating presentation on a local figure whose story deserves to be retold—Charles Turner Jr. (1760–1839).

Professor Goode reached out to the Society for information about our former resident. Board Member Karl Swenson, who lives in an 1814 home built by Turners' son, provided local background information to the professor.

“*Constituents jeered him, Plymouth mobs attacked him, and political defeat followed.*”

Charles Turner, Jr.'s life touched nearly every sphere of early America. Born in Old Scituate (which included today's Norwell), he fought as a teenager in the Revolutionary War before returning to work the rocky Massachusetts soil.

Restless by nature, Turner took on surveying and exploration, leaving behind one of the first written accounts of ascending Maine's formidable Mount Katahdin. His adventures revealed both courage and curiosity, qualities that would later define his political career.

Elected to Congress during the tense years leading up to the War of 1812,

Turner shocked his maritime district by joining the War Hawks, those fiery legislators pressing for open conflict with Great Britain. While his neighbors feared economic ruin from blockades and embargoes, Turner argued that republican honor and sovereignty outweighed commerce. In a rare act of total consistency, he voted for every single war measure—an almost unheard-of record.

The cost was heavy for Turner's political career. Constituents jeered him, Plymouth mobs attacked him, and political defeat followed. Yet Turner remained undaunted, later

serving as judge, postmaster, and boundary commissioner.

Professor Goode's research restores Turner to his rightful place as a patriot of principle—an explorer, soldier, and statesman who never wavered in his devotion to the republic.



Visit MaineMemory.NET

to read the transcribed notes from Charles Turner, Jr.'s 1804 expedition to Mt. Katahdin. With two indigenous guides to pilot and assist in the ascent, Turner and 6 other surveyors were the first non-Natives to climb the mountain.

Norwell's own **CHARLES TURNER**

Congressional War Hawk from the War of 1812

Wednesday, Oct. 8th | 5:30–7:30 pm

EVENING SCHEDULE

5:30	Society Meet & Greet
6:00	90 th Annual Meeting
6:15	Prof. Jim Goode's presentation on Congressman Charles Turner
7:15	Q&A



FREE!



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INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING?

_____ Researching at the Archives _____ Other:

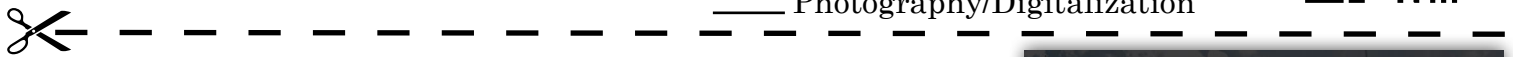
_____ Organizing at the Archives

_____ Farmhouse Tour Guide

_____ Farmhouse Maintenance

_____ Event Planning

_____ Photography/Digitalization



Henry Norwell, cont'd.

(continued from page 5)

HENRY NORWELL DIES


In 1903, at the age of 71, Henry Norwell died of heart trouble while visiting his winter home in Apopka, Florida, where he owned extensive orange groves. "Throngs of people" attended his Boston funeral service, including store employees and business associates from New York and Chicago. The Norwell selectmen came together, accompanied by a group of about a dozen citizens. John Shepard served as a pallbearer. Out of respect for Henry, all the department stores and dry goods houses closed their doors for one hour and the Shepard Norwell store was closed all day.

The store continued to operate under the Shepard Norwell name until the late teens, when it became known simply as "Shepard's." Management of the store passed to John Shepard's son, John II, and his two grandsons, John III and Robert. Another Shepard's store was established in Providence and operated until 1973.

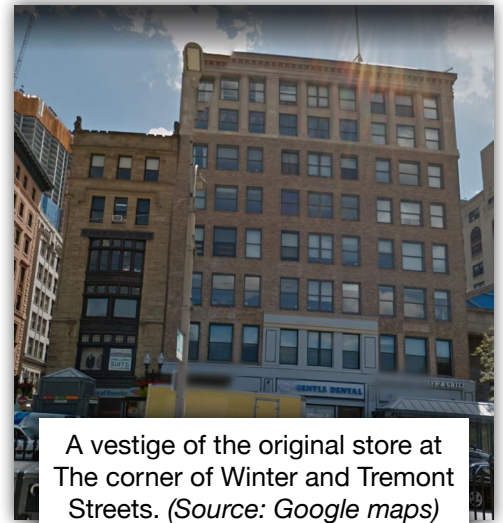
John III, also a successful entrepreneur in radio, installed a 65-foot radio tower on the roof of the Boston store. Live shows were broadcast to large crowds on Tremont Street from speakers atop the store's popular Colonial Restaurant.

By 1937, John II had grown too old to run the Boston store, John III was

fully immersed in his radio venture, and Robert's attention was dedicated exclusively to the Providence store. Therefore, the decision was made to close the Boston store on Christmas Eve, 1937 and sell the remaining inventory to Filene's Basement, located just down the street from Shepards (and across from Jordan Marsh).

Thus ended a storied 72-year run for the store. Today, a portion of the original building remains, but little else survives to remind us of the "store of stores" that brought Henry Norwell his fortune and played such a vital role in our town's history. 

In addition to the Archives at the Norwell Historical Society, the following sources were used for research: The Boston Globe; The Great American Shopping Experience, The History of American Retail from Main Street to the Mall by Stephen M. Provost; Jordan Marsh, New England's Largest Store by Anthony M. Sammarco; Leading Manufacturers and Merchants of the City of Boston and a Review of the Prominent Exchanges, Boston 1885; Narrative History of South Scituate and Norwell by Samuel Olson; Newspapers.com; Service and Style, How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class by Jan Whitaker; Shopping Days in Retro Boston, blog post; and The Way We Were by Jeanne Garside.



A vestige of the original store at The corner of Winter and Tremont Streets. (Source: Google maps)



See the latest First Parish Cemetery Comes Alive! tour video featuring Frank Mellen portraying Anson Robbins at the 2024 tour. This year's tour will again feature Frank as Emphraim Otis: the victim of a notorious safe robbery who eventually ended his life by throwing himself down a well!



NORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Fall 2025



Upcoming Events

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



Kayaking Through History: A North River Shipyard Tour + Paddle

9:30 am to 1:00 pm at the Chittenden Landing

Sunday, Sept. 21st

Join the Norwell Historical Society for a tour of three North River shipyards: Chittenden, Wanton, and Block House. Bring your own kayak and meet at 9:30 at the Chittenden Landing. Please visit the website for more information and details. (FREE)

First Sundays open museum day

3:00 to 5:00 pm at the Jacobs Farmhouse, 4 Jacobs Lane, Norwell

Sunday, Oct. 5th and Nov. 2nd

Come for a tour of the Jacobs Farmhouse Museum. (FREE)

Annual Meeting & "Rep. Charles H. Turner & the War of 1812" Presentation by Prof. Jim Goode

5:30–7:30 pm at the Union Mission Chapel, 315 Old Oaken Bucket Rd., Scituate

Wednesday, Oct. 8th

Jim Goode, Professor Emeritus of History at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, will talk about Congressman Charles Turner, a Scituate (Norwell) resident. For more info, see page 6 of this newsletter. (FREE)

First Parish Cemetery Comes Alive! Tour | Sat., Oct. 25th (Rain: Sun., Oct. 26th)

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

Join the Norwell Historical Society for its 6th 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 below.

Suggested donation of \$15/adult (\$10/member) for all who are able.

REGISTRATION
REQUIRED
(SCAN THE CODE)



FIRST PARISH CEMETERY

Comes Alive!

FEATURING GRAVESIDE PORTRAYALS
OF FASCINATING PEOPLE FROM
NORWELL'S PAST



\$15
SUGGESTED DONATION
PER NON-MEMBER
ADULT

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 25TH

NOON - 3:00

RAIN DATE: SUNDAY, OCTOBER 26TH

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