



NORTH RIVER PACKET

For the latest online news and events, visit norwellhistoricalsociety.org

Let Us Not Sit Idle: the Story of the Norwell Women's Defense Corps

The Society has been working to expand its collection of Norwell military materials and recently received a wonderful scrapbook kept from 1941 through 1942 about the activities of the Norwell Women's Defense Corps during World War II. Donated by David and Karen McPherson, the scrapbook was created by David's grandmother Jessie Randall Bailey, who lived on River Street and was an officer in the Corps.

by Janet Watson, Society Archivist

In 1940, the Town of Norwell organized a committee of 28 citizens (26 men and 2 women) eventually to be known as the Committee of Public Safety.

This group was tasked with the defense of the community in the wake of World War II which, at the time, was confined to Europe and Asia. The Committee issued a notice to the citizens:

"Every thinking person is aware that practically the entire world is passing through an unparalleled crisis. The most important element in this upheaval is the life and death struggle between two violently opposed ideas of government, Democracy and Dictatorship. ... Because of this world situation the Government of Massachusetts has directed the formation of local committees on Public Safety for every city, town, and village of this state."

Meanwhile Natalie Hayes Hammond, the daughter of a millionaire from Gloucester, wanted to help with civil defense. Having been dissuaded from going to Europe to help, she organized the Women's Defense School to instruct women in all phases of civilian defense work.

On April 2, 1941, then Massachusetts Governor Saltonstall approved the establishment of the Massachusetts Women's Defense Corps (WDC) as a division of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety, and Hammond appointed herself Colonel of the organization.

Some saw the Corps as elitist, but Hammond must have been a skilled organizer because by the end of 1941 there were over 100 defense schools throughout the Commonwealth.

“Women of Norwell – Here is What You Have Been Waiting For”

A former Broadway costume designer, Hammond was keenly aware of the importance of apparel. She had the handsome (and expensive) brown

Corps uniforms—which the members purchased at their own expense—designed by Abercrombie & Fitch.

Like Natalie Hammond, Norwell's Helen Fogg also came from an upper class family. She had been a young teenager during WWI and, in her



Helen Fogg directing her NWDC recruits from the back of her 1940s woody station wagon.

biography, she related how she dreamed of driving an ambulance but had to settle for rolling bandages!

When WWII erupted, Helen Fogg was again determined to help. She attended Hammond's Defense School and returned to Norwell with the intention of organizing a local chapter. The announcement was issued on August 18, 1941 in a pamphlet with the title "Women of Norwell – Here is What You Have Been Waiting For."

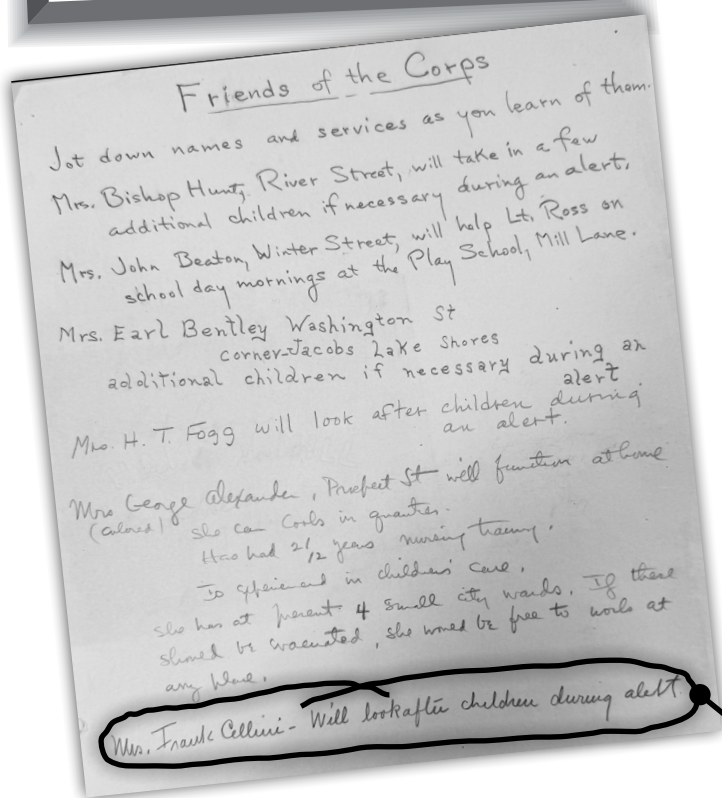
The pamphlet outlined the courses to be offered and ended with the admonition, "Let us not sit idle wasting vital moments in talk. IT IS TIME FOR ACTION."

Helen became the Chairwoman of the Norwell Corps (NWDC), first with the rank of Captain and then Major.

(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.*



Harry Arthur Merritt
age 98, passed away
on February 19, 2025

*Harry Merritt was a longtime Historical
Society member, WWII veteran, Norwell
firefighter, and town volunteer.*

*Read more about Mr. Merritt's life in the
transcript from his interview on page 3.*

Information on the WWII-era Norwell Women's Defense Corps (NWDC) was recently donated to the Society (see *article beginning on page 1*). This scrap of paper from the collection notes "Friends of the Corps"—women who had children at home to care for, but still wanted to assist the NWDC in their efforts. The list notes Mrs. Frank Cellini who "will look after children during alert." Mrs. Cellini lived in a tiny log cabin on Mount Blue Street. The cabin will be one of the many homes featured at the upcoming Homes of Norwell Tour to benefit the James Library & Center for the Arts. To see Mrs. Cellini's cabin and appreciate the coziness of a cabin filled with neighborhood children, buy your ticket at the James website: JAMESLIBRARY.ORG/EVENTS

Officers

Wendy Bawabe, President
Christian Jevne, Secretary
Marybeth Shea, Treasurer

Board of Directors

Pamela Bower-Basso
Chad Forman
Dianne Forman
Rebecca Freed
Daniel Neumann
Stephen O'Neill
Alan Prouty
Karl Swenson
Janet Watson, Archivist

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.



Oral History Transcription

Harry Merritt
1926-2025

Below is an edited interview with Harry Merritt, who lived in Norwell all of his life. The original oral history interview was conducted by Norwell student Jason Sullivan in 1985.

Norwell suited my father and my grandfather who were carpenters and builders. My mother came to the area from Nova Scotia to do housework and cooking and things of that nature, and there were a lot of opportunities here. My mother was French Canadian and my father was a Yankee all the way back to the Mayflower.

I have had a lot of interesting childhood experiences--a great deal I don't want to put on tape! I can remember my father running the mail delivery from Norwell to Scituate (the Greenbush section). He would pick up the mail sacks and bring it back to the Norwell Post Office for sorting and delivering to the people of the town.

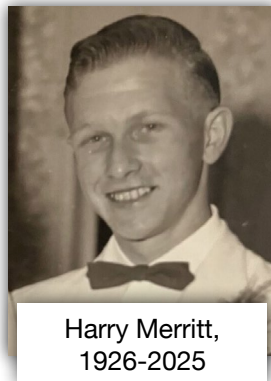
When I was in the sixth or seventh grade (December, 1936), I went to school in a building where the Osborn School now stands [today's Norwell Town Hall]. As I remember we were away at a basketball game and when we got back, the building had burned down. Later on after it burned, we went to classes at Hanover from 2:30 to 6:30. These were half-day sessions and we were bused from Hanover and back. We did that for two years while the town built the Sparrell Building. So it was quite an experience at that age to go to another town to go to school and to get back late at night.

I received a very good education in the Norwell schools. We had a few specialized courses because the year or two before I graduated, the Second World War had started. They introduced some special mathematic courses, some aviation aerodynamic classes which were, at the time, pretty interesting. I think probably the biggest difference today is

size. I had 26 people in my senior class. Also there are so many more subjects today so the education is much broader than what we got at that time.

I also attended The Wentworth Institute which, at that time, had been taken over by the U.S. Government and run by the U.S. Navy. They were offering courses in basic engineering, marine engines, boilers, diesel engines, and any type of mechanical courses like that. We lived at the hotel Somerset in Boston (which was also taken over by the Navy) while we took classes. This was pretty nice living as far as being in the Navy was concerned. It was on the fifth floor, there were only three of us to a room and we marched to the Wentworth Institute every morning to school. From there I went to diesel training school in Richmond, Virginia.

The most interesting experiences of my lifetime were when I was a teen, after going through the schools in Boston and Virginia. I was shipped to California and we went out to the South Pacific attached to an air supply squadron which was land based. Along with the C.B.'s, we set up supply bases for transporting equipment to the forward lines or wherever the




Harry Merritt,
1926-2025

fighting was going on. I landed at the island of New Guinea, transferred to the Philippine Islands, and then, to the Admiralty Islands which are a small group of islands in the extreme South Pacific. The biggest of them is about a mile long and a half mile wide, and this was the airstrip. It was a very interesting trip

down there from the Philippines by small landing craft which took us about ten days. We stopped at little, small islands which had probably not seen a white man in years. We did some trading with the natives, a very interesting experience--something which I've always wanted to go back and do over again. Then I stayed on the Admiralty Islands for about a year and a half, which is a very long time on a small island, I'll tell you! We did leave there once, back to the Philippines. We flew up and back, but only for a few days. After the year and a half was up (which was a tour of duty at that time) then we came to the island of Guam, which is one of our biggest bases now, and at that time was just growing. Then we came back to the United States.

I don't think WWII had too many effects on Norwell. Some rationing of gasoline, I guess, rationing of groceries at one time.

After the war, I became a Commander of the American Legion, a national organization of veterans of all wars. Norwell's post is #192. I was instrumental in obtaining the old Center School building in Norwell Center and converting it into a legion headquarters [today this is the parking lot of Coastal Heritage Bank]. We stayed there for several years and decided it was too big for our organization and gave it back to the town which eventually tore it down.

I am a cousin, of what distance I can't tell you, of historian Joseph Foster Merritt. He is a cousin on my grandfather's side and I can remember him when I was growing up. He was the Town Clerk of Norwell at that time, which probably gave him a lot of information as to the books he has written. I've read them all. They're very interesting. 

Women's Defense Corps, cont'd.

(continued from page 1)

The NWDC offered training in three areas:

1. Motor Transport: organized into 10-12 units, these women could respond to distant towns to evacuate women and children and provide medical transport.
2. Mobile Wardens: these women were tasked with responding to air raids and fire fighting.
3. Canteen: these women provided food for large groups

78 trainees were recruited, 58 of whom graduated on November 12, 1941. Despite this success, Major Fogg said that recruitment did not meet expectations. "Motor transport seems to be the most glamorous, but more wardens and mobile canteen recruits are needed."



The 1941 Annual Town Report said:

"The Norwell Women's Corp is ready for instant service. Its headquarters are manned 24 hours a day. By drill, practice convoy, and the frequent preparation of meals for large groups, it maintains a constant readiness for warden duty, emergency evacuation, and for the feeding of numbers of people in any stricken area."

On December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was attacked, and the NWDC was now operating on a wartime basis from its headquarters at Cushing Town Hall.

The first six months of 1942 were the most active period for the Town Civilian Defense and for the NWDC. Convoys require military discipline to move in time of disaster, so the NWDC held

frequent convoy practices. In January, despite below zero temperatures, the motor corps participated in a convoy to "Captain McLean's lodge [in Scituate] for luncheon."

On January 5, 1942, there was a bomb demonstration in which six real bombs were detonated and the resulting fires extinguished.



On February 1, 1942, the NWDC responded to a simulated bombing incident on Ridge Hill, and on February 8, there was another convoy practice to the Cohasset Yacht Club.

On February 22, real war conditions were staged in six areas of Norwell with coordinated response from the Town Civil Defense, NWDC, and the Boy Scouts who had been trained in communications.

In a "Report on the Audibility of Air Raid Signals," ten locations in Norwell were monitored by the NWDC to determine if the siren could be heard and whether residents complied with requirements. Corps member Mrs. McGhee at Jacobs Lake development reported from her post:

"Signals all distinct. All houses except one extinguished lights promptly. The exception was taken care of by the air raid warden."

At the state level however, tensions between the Mass WDC and the Public Safety Committee had been growing, and by 1942 were out in the open. Earlier in that year, Mrs. Robert Homans, the head of the Women's Division of Public Safety, was quoted in the newspapers as saying that some members of the Corps were "thrill seekers" who took up defense work as

an excuse for getting into uniform to "make a bit of whoopee" and shirk their home duties.

Another issue was that Mass WDC Colonel Natalie Hammond saw the Corps as her personal fiefdom and called the members "her girls." When Hammond was dissatisfied with decisions of her boss, Public Safety Director J. W. Farley, she went over his head directly to complain to the governor.

Hammond believed in her girls, but after a year, the corps had not had an opportunity to show its value to the public. Then in November 1942, a true disaster occurred: the Cocoanut Grove nightclub fire.

THE COCOANUT GROVE FIRE in Boston was a nightclub fire which took place on November 28, 1942 and resulted in the deaths of 492 people. It is the deadliest nightclub fire in history and the third-deadliest single-building fire in history.

Fire regulations had been disregarded by the club owners, some exit doors had been locked to prevent the unauthorized entry of patrons, and the elaborate palm tree décor in the club contained flammable materials.

The fire occurred during the first Thanksgiving weekend since the U.S. had entered World War II, and the Grove was filled to more than twice its legal capacity.

The fire was initiated by an electrical short and fueled by methyl chloride in the air conditioning unit which was using that flammable gas because of a wartime shortage of freon.



To learn more about the Cocoanut Grove fire, use the QR code at right to read an article by the Boston Fire Historical Society at [BOSTONFIREHISTORY.ORG](https://bostonfirehistory.org).

(continued on page 5)

Women's Defense Corps, cont'd.

(continued from page 4)

On her own without authorization, Natalie Hammond ordered several motor corps from Greater Boston to the scene where the Red Cross, fire departments, and police had already been called. The problem was the WDC hadn't been expected and no one knew what to do with them, but in their fashionable uniforms they were widely photographed by the newspapers and treated as heroines.

Amid this positive publicity, a Mass WDC official sent letters to all the newspapers accusing the Public Safety Committee of hindering response to the fire by not providing equipment for the Mass WDC. This was the final straw. In a public rebuke, Director Farley lambasted Hammond for being insubordinate. He said of Hammond,

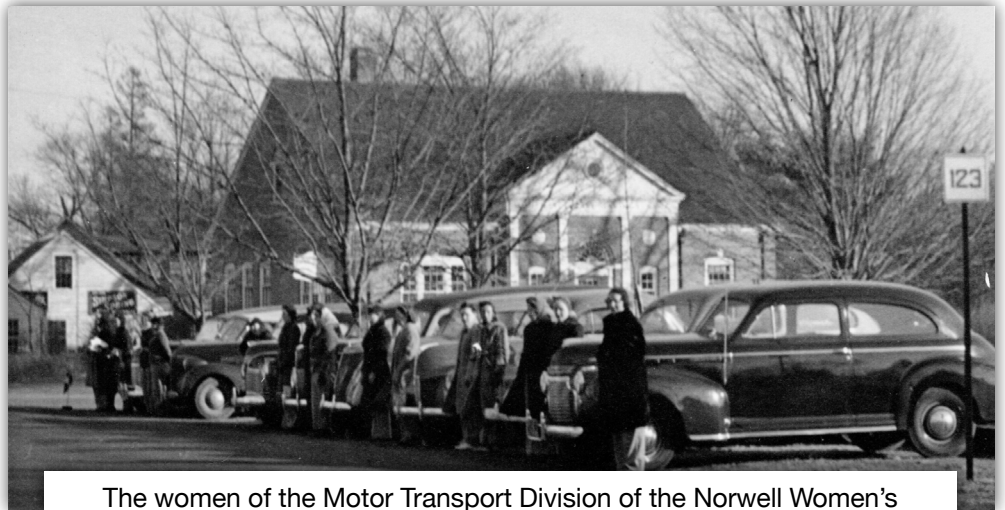
"There were under her command less than 1% of the total personnel in Civilian Defense, but she managed to cause 99% our headaches."

In February 1943, a "sweeping shakeup" of the Mass WDC was announced. The Corps was dissolved and simultaneously reestablished as a new organization totally under state control.

The 12,000 members were required to re-enlist and take an oath of allegiance. The director announced that the Corps would not be restricted to single women, but "those with families to care for would be rejected." Members were allowed to wear their uniforms only when on active duty. In addition all members would have to resign from local defense organizations so women who remained active in their towns could no longer belong to the Corps.

Colonel Hammond retained her job for another month until she was fired in March 1943. It seemed that Hammond and the women of the Corps had been "put in their place."

Despite the problems in the statewide organization, the Norwell Corps had been by all accounts a successful and well run group that worked cooperatively with the other segments of the Norwell Defense Committee. There are no records of whether any



The women of the Motor Transport Division of the Norwell Women's Defense Corps pose in Norwell Center with their vehicles.

women from Norwell enlisted in the centralized Mass WDC, or whether they remained part of the Women's Division of the local Committee, or perhaps simply dropped out to attend to the increasingly difficult task of running a household with food and gas rationing and men engaged in wartime activities.

The 1943 Norwell Annual Town Report said that the Defense Committee

"...found itself facing diminishing need for the continuance of its quick-functioning and efficient organization brought about by the checking of the submarine menace and a decreased likelihood of an attack by air..."

In other words, Norwell citizens were thoroughly trained for any emergency, and the danger of such an emergency was on the wane.

The Women's Division was assigned to decidedly less glamorous jobs than they had before, mainly assisting in the collection of tin cans, silk stockings (used for powder bags for naval guns), fats (used to produce glycerin, a vital ingredient in explosives and other war materials), and paper.

Helen Fogg enlisted in the Red Cross, and for the remainder of the War she was stationed in the South Pacific as a hospital aide.

The photos in Mrs. Bailey's scrapbook show women enthusiastic about their exciting new jobs and enjoying the

camaraderie of working together. It seems that the Women's Defense Corps was, indeed, what women in Norwell had been waiting for.

A salvage poster encouraging recycling. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society



For a short time the door of opportunity had opened before it closed again. The NWDC was arguably ahead of its time, but it contributed to the progress that has been made in providing opportunities for women today to work as first responders, serve in the military, and generally participate equally in the workplace. 🍃

The Society Helps Solve an International Mystery!

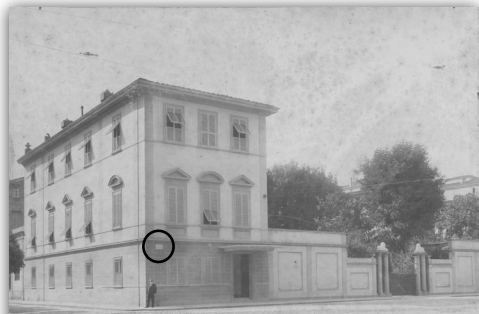
Lost items found at the Jacobs Farmhouse, digitization of historic photographs, and a Cemetery Tour video... all clues that led a team of researchers to the lost Torrey mansion.

written by Janet Watson, Archivist

The Norwell Historical Society's second "First Parish Comes Alive!" Cemetery Tour in 2021 featured actor Brett Holland playing the role of Franklin Torrey (1830-1912). Torrey was a South Scituate native whose career took him to Italy.

Franklin was one of eight children of shipbuilder David Torrey. The Torreys lived on River Street and were an industrious family involved in banking, sawmills, manufacturing, and grocery stores. They were, possibly, the wealthiest family in town in the mid-1800s.

In the 1850s, two of Franklin's brothers, George and Everett, established a business to import marble from the famous Carrara quarries in Italy, and Franklin moved his young family to Carrara to supervise the business.



Franklin Torrey posing in front of the Torrey villa in Florence with the small street sign over his head. Use this QR code → to see the villa today!



The firm provided marble for buildings throughout the United States including the Boston State House and the Boston Public Library.

Not only did Franklin oversee the import/export business, he also became

a noted sculptor of funeral statuary (carved marble decorating graves and tombs). He was also appointed as the United States ambassador to Florence which was not part of Italy until 1861.

When Franklin's father David died in 1877, Franklin designed an impressive monument at First Parish Cemetery that featured several of his own sculptures. Local historian Mary Power wrote:

"One imposing monument in the cemetery is that of the Torrey family... Around the curbing at intervals are beside the urns upon the corners, the figures of Faith, Hope, and Charity in the middle of the sides while on either side of the steps are figures of Christ on the left side and an angel with flowing robes exquisitely carved in Carrara marble and sent from Italy by Franklin Torrey whose parents are buried there."

At one time it was the most beautiful monument in the cemetery but, as noted by actor Brett Holland in his portrayal of Franklin Torrey, the statuary has since disappeared—probably stolen—many years ago.

Unfortunately, the stolen statuary is not the "international mystery" the Society has helped to solve.

In January 2025, the Norwell Historical Society was contacted by Jeffrey Begeal from North Carolina. Begeal was working with an international group of researchers to identify all of the Franklin Torrey statuary and had stumbled upon the video of Holland's portrayal, filmed by Norwell Spotlight TV and available online. Begeal wanted to know if the Society had more information on Franklin Torrey. He also mentioned that the team was looking for the Torrey Villa in Florence which was likely full of beautiful marble. They

had concerns, however, that the villa had been destroyed by World War II bombing.

Coincidentally while cleaning the Jacobs Farmhouse, the Society had discovered several photos of the Torrey family in Italy. One (shown at left) was featured in the "From the Archives" section of the Fall, 2024 newsletter.

"Not only did he oversee the import/export business, he also became a noted sculptor of funeral statuary."

Scanning the images, we were able to send the photo of Mrs. Torrey in her gilded age finery as well as pictures of the Torrey children in Italian costumes, and two photos of the Torrey villa in Florence with Franklin Torrey standing below what appeared to be a street sign, but was too small to read.

Begeal sent the photos of the Torrey Villa to his Italian counterpart Matteo Giunti, who decided he would try to enhance the scanned image. Excitedly Matteo wrote back:

"I can read the address, Piazza degli Zuavi, which is Piazza Vittorio Veneto today, and I found the Villa!!"

The Society is gratified that the work we have done to digitize and make our collection accessible online has helped solve a mystery about a prominent South Scituate ex-patriot, his villa in Florence, and his extensive catalog of marble statuary which may still be available to view.

Next mystery to solve: where are the missing urns, figures, and angels from the Torrey's First Parish gravesite? 🍀

 **JOIN or RENEW online**  NORWELLHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG or fill out this form:

DATE _____ NAME _____

MAILING ADDRESS _____

TOWN _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

EMAIL _____

3-Year Membership (\$35) _____

Life Membership (\$350) _____

Donation (any amount) _____

Please make checks payable to:

Norwell Historical Society and mail to:

NHS, P.O. Box 693, Norwell, MA 02061

INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING?

_____ Researching at the Archives _____ Other:

_____ Organizing at the Archives

_____ Farmhouse Tour Guide

_____ Farmhouse Maintenance

_____ Event Planning

_____ Photography/Digitalization



Old Scituate Reacts: Patriots Day, 1775

250 years ago this April, the Battles of Lexington and Concord were fought, beginning what would eventually become the Revolutionary War. But what was happening in Old Scituate (today's Norwell and Scituate) at that time?

When Scituate author Jim Glinski approached the Norwell Historical Society Board months ago, he was extolling the dedication of Old Scituate patriots. In his book *Tale of Two Towns: Scituate and Marshfield During the American Revolution*, Jim notes 212 Old Scituate men immediately responded to the Lexington Alarm on April 19, 1775. And the trend continued throughout the war as 80% of men between the ages of 16 and 60 performed military service, a total of 538 men from Old Scituate! And this number does not include the women of the town who not only took over the duties previously performed by their men, but also produced 125 coats for the militia... in their spare time!

Using the extensive research in Jim's book, Wendy Bawabe wrote a fictional play based on the actual historic events that took place in Old Scituate on or around April 19, 1775, the day of the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

The idea for staging an interactive play "in the room where it happened" occurred after attending a performance of *Blood on the Snow* at the Old State

House in Boston. This play depicted a meeting of the town's leaders the day after the Boston Massacre, which occurred outside the building.



Blood on the Snow was performed at the Old State House in Boston.

Staging it as a fictional Town Meeting in one of Scituate's meetinghouses, the play will be interactive, inviting audience members to cheer and jeer at the patriots and loyalists. Upon entering, attendees will receive a "character card" with facts about an actual Old Scituate resident. Encouraged to consider the position of their assigned character, audience members are asked to participate in the lively (and interactive) Town Meeting.

While the play is based on facts, it is a fictional account of an Old Scituate Town Meeting. On April 19, 1775, the Scituate militia companies were performing drills in Pembroke with other local militias when a post rider came directly to them and brought news of the fighting in Lexington and Concord. There was an actual Town Meeting, but it occurred days later—after the news of the battles had spread.

Were women or Black men allowed to speak at a Town Meeting in 1775? Certainly not. But this fictional play strives to represent the viewpoints of the entire population of Old Scituate at the time: men and women, Black and White, Patriot and Tory.

The performance will give attendees a sense of the mindset of Old Scituate residents in the days before the Battles of Lexington and Concord. At this point in time, the colonists were asking for the restoration of their rights as citizens of the British Empire, not necessarily seeking independence from Britain. Their immediate desire was to have King George III repeal the Intolerable Acts of 1774, which greatly angered the majority of the town.

For more information on the performances, visit the Society website: NORWELLHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG.



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



RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Spring 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.



First Sundays Open Museum Day

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

Sun., April 6th

Come for a tour of the Jacobs Farmhouse Museum and peek into Norwell's history! Learn more about the Jacobs family, the history of our town, and the Historical Society and its many projects. **(FREE)**

Homes of Norwell Tour

9:00 to 2:00 pm beginning at the Cushing Center in Norwell Center

Fri., April 11th

Benefiting the James Library, this tour features two newer homes and four historic homes researched by the Historical Society. A unique opportunity to see the interiors of some of the great houses in our town! [Tickets at the James website.](#) **(\$50 IN ADVANCE)**

Old Scituate Reacts: Patriots Day, 1775, an interactive play

at First Parish of Norwell (11:00 am) & at First Parish of Scituate (1:30 pm)

Mon., April 21st

This joint program with the Scituate Historical Society will feature a short interactive play recreating a 1775 Town Meeting. Come early to be in the room where it happens and hear residents' debates and worries leading up to the start of the Revolutionary War. **(FREE)**

Antiques Roadshow-Style Appraisal Event

1:00 to 4:00 pm, Phoenix Lodge, Hanover Four Corners

Sun., April 27th

Join the appraisers from J. James Auctioneers & Appraisers of Plymouth to learn more about your antique treasures and find out their value. Proceeds benefit the Norwell + Hanover Historical Societies. Online sign-up will be available in April. **(\$25/ITEM APPRAISED)**

May Day Basketmaking at the Jacobs Farmhouse

2:00 to 4:00 pm at the Jacobs Farmhouse, 4 Jacobs Lane, Norwell

Sun., May 1st

Come to make a May Day basket to hang on your neighbor's door, and stay for a tour of the Jacobs Farmhouse Museum! This event is limited to 20 attendees, online sign-up will be available in April. **(\$10/member, \$20/non-member)**

Mother's Day Tea at the Jacobs Farmhouse Museum

2:00 to 4:00 pm at the Jacobs Farmhouse, 4 Jacobs Lane, Norwell

Sun., May 1st

Listen to Mrs. Jacobs read letters from her dutiful son, Henry, while she serves tea to guests. **(FREE/member, \$10/non-member)**