



NORTH RIVER PACKET

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The Evolution of a Fire Department

Norwell did not always have a Fire Department—what began as a loose troop of “Forest Fire Wardens” evolved into the professional crew we know today.

by Jeff Simpson, Norwell Fire Chief

FIRST A TRUCK, THEN A DEPARTMENT, THEN A STATION

The origins of the original Norwell Central Fire Station (formerly referred to as Company 1 or Combination 1) required some research. While the earliest history remains somewhat unclear, interviews and old records shed light on early Norwell firefighting.

By the early 20th century, it became apparent that a Fire Department would be needed in town. Prior to the establishment of the Norwell Fire Department, appointed “Forest Fire Wardens” were responsible for protecting life and property from an ever-growing fire problem. The Forest Fire Wardens were charged with overseeing the distribution of fire extinguishers throughout the town. Several old Town Reports refer to a list of locations where fire extinguishers were strategically placed in different sections of town, in case they were needed by residents.

As Norwell continued to change and evolve, the need for a more centralized system of responding to fires was becoming clear. Sometime in the early 1920s, a prominent Boston automotive dealer and Norwell Forest Fire Warden, donated Norwell its first fire truck—setting the stage for the formation of the Town’s Fire Department.

According to records collected by retired Deputy Fire Chief Herb Fulton, Norwell’s first fire truck was a 1921 Ford Model T Style. In accordance with

state law at the time, Norwell was well on its way to having an organized force equipped to provide fire protection for the taxpayers. The first official reference to the Fire Department’s formation occurred in 1925 when Town Meeting voted, “the appropriation of fire apparatus be expended only under the direction of the Chief of the Fire Department when a Fire Company shall be formed.” In need of a place to safely house its new fire truck and associated equipment, construction of Norwell’s first fire station began that same year.



The former Fire Station No. 1
in Norwell Center.

According to Fulton’s interview with former Norwell Fireman John A. Clark, Harry Merritt was the driving force behind the construction of Norwell’s first fire station located in the center of town. According to old records, Harry framed the old engine house and was a major contributor to the ensuing construction. Interestingly enough, Harry Merritt’s son, Harry A. Merritt, also served as a Norwell fireman for many years. His grandson has been employed by the Norwell Fire Department for many years as a

career firefighter, sharing in the family tradition.

Mr. Merritt, Sr. was a very familiar face around town—and is still today. After serving as the Facilities Manager for the Norwell School Department, he retired in the 1980s.

“*...fire extinguishers were strategically placed in different sections of town in case they were needed by residents*”

The original Station 1 was the first official fire station in Norwell, followed by Ridge Hill (Co. #2), and Church Hill Fire Company (Co. #3). By 1945, every section of town had its own respective fire station—each with at least one fire truck and 25 members!

During these early years, membership grew exponentially as many of Norwell’s first “firemen” worked within the town’s borders. Norwell was primarily a blue collar community at the time, and many of the town’s volunteer firemen worked as carpenters, farmers, and tradesmen around town. The combination of having members living and working in close proximity to their respective fire stations (each with an array of desirable skill-sets) provided the taxpayers with a confident

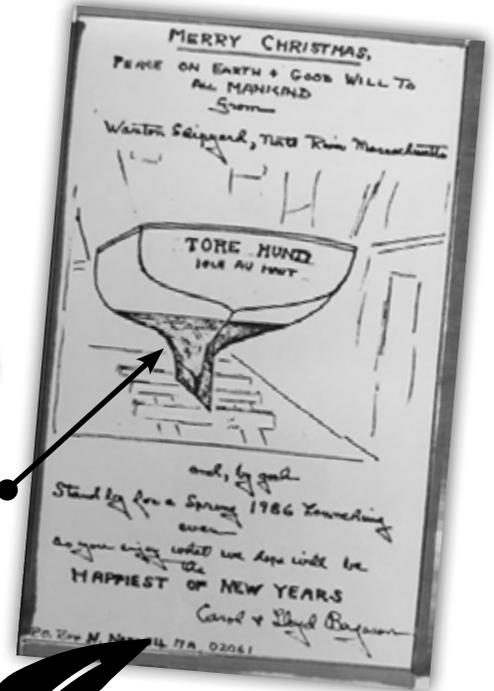
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FROM THE ARCHIVES

Treasures known and treasures found in the Norwell Historical Society Archives, in the Society Research Library, and in the Jacobs Farmhouse Museum are featured here in each issue.

Last year, Board member Christian Jevne opened this trunk at the Jacobs Farmhouse Museum to discover it was filled with clothing! We've since had all of the items within preserved and stored properly in our Archives, but the trunk itself is a piece of art as well! Looking closely at the label, you can see it was made in Boston by Robert Burr.

The trunk was owned by Ichabod Richmond Jacobs (born in 1774) who inherited the Farmhouse and the Jacobs Mills from his older brother Richmond. Below is Ichabod's records for the saw mill from 1833—now kept in the Society Archives.



See a photo of the launching of the *Helen M. Foster* on our website. On the Home Page, scroll down to the Historic Photo Gallery and find the Buildings & Misc. Photos.

This 1986 greeting card from Carol and Lloyd Bergeson features a drawing of the *Tore Hund*, a ship built by Mr. Bergeson at his home on the North River. While the *Helen M. Foster* may have been the last vessel launched from a working North River shipyard, the *Tore Hund* is the last vessel built and launched on the river—albeit not from an official “shipyard.”

Just The Facts

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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.

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
781-659-1888 (Research Library)



DISCOVER MORE ON OUR WEBSITE!

Look for the magnifying glasses in this issue—that means there is more to discover on-line at the Society's website NORWELLHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG.

NOTE: the online version of the newsletter has other links so you can discover even more!



Oral History Transcriptions

Volunteers are urgently needed to reformat the deteriorating oral history cassette tapes to a digital format before they are lost for good. It is an easy task that can be done at home. Please contact Janet Watson at watsonje@comcast.net.

Below is an edited interview with retired police officer **Theodore Baldwin** conducted by Norwell student Steve Fitzgerald in 1996. Mr. Baldwin passed away in 2019 at age 87.

Members of my family have lived in Norwell for over 100 years. My grandfather worked in the shoe factory, which was located on Norwell Avenue.

I went to Norwell Elementary School [known as Center School] located in Norwell Center, in what is now the parking lot for the bank. Before the school was torn down, it used to be the [American] Legion hall, too. I believe it was Post 192 and it was named after Samuel Turner, who lived on Central Street.

From there I went up to the Sparrell building, which was then the High School. In 1948, there were only 18 kids in the graduating class.

Mrs. Ella Osborn, one of my teachers, had coat hooks outside the door, and if you misbehaved she would take you out there. The coat hook was just high enough off the floor—she would take you by the collar and hang you



Center School, also called Norwell Elementary School

there so your tip toes were just touching the floor. And there you hung until you behaved yourself. I think everybody got a chance to hang out there one time or another.

[After school], we all had part-time jobs. People used to work in Norwell Center at McFarland's garage for 25 cents an afternoon scraping grease off the floor.

One of the most interesting experiences [in my life] was as a young fella' when I joined the Army during the Korean Crisis. While in Korea, I had an opportunity to go on what they call R&R (Rest and Recuperation)... and I spent 14 days in Japan. I went up Mount Fuji... they had a resort area there. The culture in Japan was a lot different 45 years ago, the girls always walked two or three steps behind you... [and] all the towns had a local bathtub, where everyone gets in the tub together. Everybody just paddles around, does their thing, and the next family comes in. It was really interesting.

The Norwell Police Department was created in 1955. Chief Kenneth Bradeen was the first chief. He went on in October '55 and then in February of '56, I went on as the first full-time patrolman. The Police Department used to have the ambulance service... and I was the first EMT.

When I was first in the Norwell Police Department, we had one cruiser and when that was broken down, you had to use your own car. One night when the cruiser was down for repairs, we got a call from a lady expecting, so we dashed up and put her in the back seat of my car. She delivered at the intersection of Grove and Washington Street, so I had the experience of delivering one child.

The night of the big snowstorm when the ship went aground down in Scituate [1956, the *Etrusco*], I was working with another guy and we were [driving] down Washington Street. The visibility was so bad, you couldn't see and he said "Ted, where are we?" and I said "Well, I know one thing, I just saw a headstone go by, so I think we're

in the cemetery." And that's how far off the road we were—we were in Washington Park Cemetery!

Another funny incident I recall, it was summertime, and I received a call on Main Street. A woman had a rat in her house. The house was a converted chicken coop, the rat was half the size of a cat, and I thought, "What am I going to do with this critter? How am I gonna' get him out?" So I chased him around, inside this house... with a household broom, and I'd swing at him, and I'd miss, and I'd miss. The rat would hide behind a piece of furniture, and I'd pick it up and move it outside. I eventually moved every piece of furniture out of that house but the sofa and a hutch. I recall that rat running across the room, and he jumped on the back of that sofa, and I wound up with that broom like a baseball bat, and he ended up in the fireplace, and that's how I killed that foolish rat. I then had to put everything back in the house.

Another time I had a raccoon in a women's refrigerator up in Washington Park. And I have no idea how this raccoon ever got in there, but she called me up and she was petrified. All we did was open the door, and the raccoon went out and there was no problem.

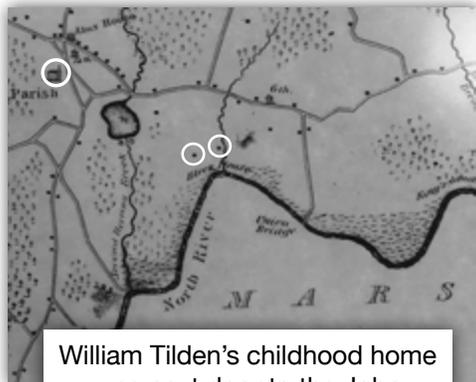
We used to chase cows around the streets of Norwell. That's the beauty of a small town. [Police officers] used to do everything. I mean you were a doctor, a minister, you name it. A police officer in a town like Norwell could expect any kind of call at any given time—from chasin' cows down the street and rats and raccoons out of houses, to taking pregnant women out on bobsleds.

Thanksgiving *in the* Early 19th Century

Rev. William Tilden reminisces of his childhood Thanksgivings in the “comfortable cottage” on the banks of the North River, circa 1825.

Taken from the manuscript of William Tilden and transcribed by Mary Louise Foster Nash Power

Suppose I give you a little outline picture of my boyhood home at Thanksgiving time. Probably it will bring to mind your own home when you were boys and girls. My home was in the country on the South Shore, South Scituate, a few miles from the sea. It had a small tide harbor where the mackerel fishing was carried on and a small river, the North River, where many vessels were built.



William Tilden's childhood home was next door to the John James house at 45 Block House Lane. Both houses are circled on this 1831 map, as well as First Parish Church (for reference).

Our house, a comfortable cottage, was on the north bank of the river, facing the south and looking up a beautiful reach of the river stretching out toward the sea, sparkling like molten silver. The shipyard where my father worked was close by.

It is Thanksgiving week, and the merry sounds of the whip saw, axe and maul are heard. But I must take you into the house, our home! It belongs to us all just as all true homes do. We will go in at the end door, we seldom used the front one. We enter a long spacious kitchen with painted floor, large open fireplace with a brick oven on one side, a good white oak back log, with back sticks to match, and fore stick to keep the

white oak chips in place which are laid out so as to invite the flame, all ablaze now with cheery welcome.

You see that the beautiful woman in middle life, with a face as warm and genial as the blaze on the hearth, the presiding genius of the place. This is Mother. That man about her age just coming in at the end door with a basket of chips on his shoulder, with a green baize jacket and sateen pants that Mother made with her

Baize /bāz/ *n.* A coarse woollen cloth, similar in texture to felt, but more durable.

own hands, that is my father and a smart fellow he is. He was not only a good carpenter, but a good shot, one of the best. The coots [American ducks] and ducks he used to bring home in the Fall of the year made us children rejoice in view of the savory pot pies coming. There are seven of us children, five girls and two boys.

It's the day before Thanksgiving. That big oven has been heated three times and what was remarkable, my brother Bert did not complain at having to split the oven wood, for he knew the reward was in hand. The harvests of pies taken out of that oven—mince, pumpkin, squash and apple—were a feast to hungry eyes. Mother and the girls had done it all—no outside help in our home.

The cloth is spread for supper before Thanksgiving. We all begin to be thankful already in view of tomorrow. Mother gets us to pass judgment on her pies and made a jam turnover just for taste. After supper we gather round the fire and crack walnuts. Bert and I had gathered them a month before and dried them on the attic floor. We set some apples before the fire to roast, told riddles, cracked our little jokes with our nuts and own fingers too, for the nut would somehow slip on the smooth flatiron, spite of all we could do.

At last bedtime came and away we went for that sweet rest that comes to innocent and happy children. We wake before the birds were heard in the meadow to greet with shouts of joy Thanksgiving morning. It is almost always a grey day in the sky but it was full of rainbow trails to our young hearts. We always had enough to eat, as much as was good for us—but it was so nice to have more than enough, more than was good for us, and a child's capacity at Thanksgiving is truly wonderful. The breakfast stanza of the opening Thanksgiving song was always rich—butter toast, with more butter than usual; sausage meat in biscuits or links, sweet and luscious; and three kinds of pies with other things to match. After this, the children could play till meeting time at eleven for the Governor's Sunday, as we used to call it, was for all innocent sports, as well as worship.

Then after meeting, the dinner. Oh such a dinner—the best Mother could do. Turkeys were scarce, but a nice fat goose with spiced stuffing and a brace of wild ducks Father shot down the river a day or two before; roast spare rib with all sorts of vegetables; a plum pudding; mince, squash, and apple pies; quince, apple and cranberry sauce enabled us to make out a very comfortable dinner.

What happened to the Tilden's house?

In William Tilden's autobiography, he notes, "...the old house took fire from some unknown cause one night, and was burned to ashes. Now there is nothing left but the old cellar, well, and enclosed walls to tell of the dear spot where most of my boyhood and early manhood was spent."

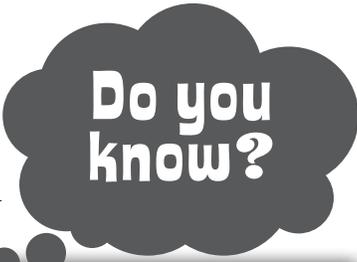
After dinner the sports of the afternoon: skating if ice, playing ball if ice failed. Supper was light, not because food failed but somehow the appetite failed.

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Thanksgiving, cont'd.

(continued from page 4)

Then came the happiest time of all, Thanksgiving evening. A Ball at the town hall for the grown up young folks, smaller parties for the children with shag barks [see below], molasses candy pulled till it was white and brittle, counting apple seeds, twirling the platter, blind man's bluff. Home tired at last—sleep sweet—blessed old Thanksgiving days.

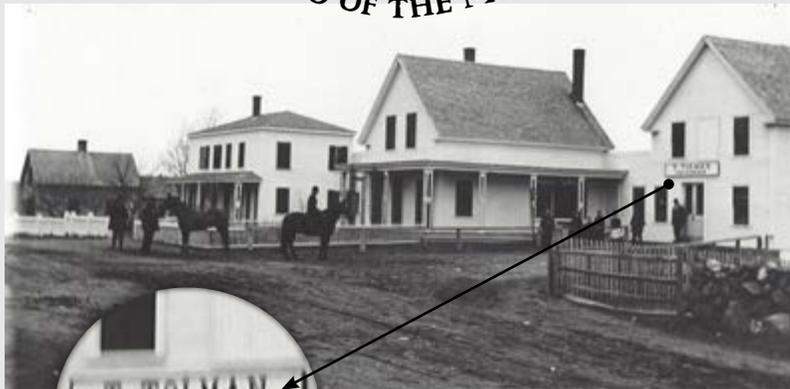


...what Shag Barks are?

William Tilden refers to this item in his description of the activities played and goodies served at Thanksgiving evening parties.

Is it a game (like Blind Man's Bluff) or a candy (like Molasses candy)? If you have an answer, please email the Society and let us know!

THROWBACK PHOTO OF THE MONTH



The Scituate Historical Society recently donated a few old photos of Norwell to our Archives.

This photo above shows two buildings still standing and two (connected) buildings no longer there.

Starting at left is the house that stands today at 18 Central Street. Next is the red house that stands today at 10-12 Central Street. At the time of this photo (probably late 1800s) the French family lived in this two-family home.

The buildings on the right were built by Thomas Tolman. According to historian Joseph Merritt, Tolman "came to this town from Hingham late in the [18]50s. He had just returned from the California mining region. He first began to manufacture buckets but soon gave this up and built a store on Central Street, just off the 'Square.' This he ran until a short time before his death."

It is unknown when these buildings were demolished or removed, but they do appear on the 1903 map of the town center. Today, the Cushing Center parking lot is located at the site.

What's in a Name? ASSINIPPI

This village—partially in Norwell and partially in North Hanover—was originally an indigenous settlement.

Where did the name Assinippi come from?

Historian Joseph Merritt says the name means "Rocky Water" and was an Indian name for the branch of Third Herring Brook in this section of town. Because the Massachusetts Indians inhabited this area, we could assume that word is of Massachusetts origins.

Why did the natives choose to live in Assinippi?

Prior to Jacobs Pond being created in the early 1700s, Third Herring Brook ran freely through the Assinippi area. Renowned for its herring runs (hence, the name!), the brook was likely a popular fishing ground for indigenous people. Some of the native artifact collection at the Jacobs Farmhouse Museum was found on land in Assinippi.

Who were the first European settlers in Assinippi?

The Jacobs family and the Collamore family were both early settlers in this area. Much is known about the Jacobs family—of Jacobs Farmhouse renown—but the name "Collamore" is less known. The Collamore house still stands today at 483 Washington Street (across from Stop & Shop on Route 53). John Collamore was the first of the family to settle in Assinippi about 1732. The Jacobs-Collamore Cemetery (off of Jacobs Trail between Doris Avenue and Wendall Avenue) used to contain numerous family stones which were later removed and moved during the construction of the houses and roads in the Jacobs Trail area. The cemetery still stands today and some of the stones were recovered and re-placed.

The Collamore Family of Assinippi

The Collamores were descendants of Capt. Anthony Collamore, who drowned off Scituate in 1693. Anthony ran packet boats on the North River—carrying passengers, supplies, and mail up and down the river and the coast as far as New Bedford. During a snow storm in 1693, his ship struck a ledge off Scituate while carrying a load of lumber to Boston. The ledge, located between the Glades and Cedar Point in Scituate, is known today as the Collamore Ledge.

Fire Department, cont'd.

(continued from page 1)

and trustworthy department. This continued on for decades as Norwell slowly transitioned away from its blue-collar roots and into a bedroom community.

TRAGEDIES IN THE 1920s

It wasn't too long before the members of "Combination 1" had their first glimpse into the dangers associated with firefighting.

On Christmas Eve of 1925, Scituate Engine 1 tipped over and rolled three times at the corner of Main and Bridge Street in Norwell. According to the *Boston Globe*, "the firemen were responding to a call for aid from the Norwell Fire Department who were fighting a fire at the house of Arthur T. Smith of Main Street." The *Globe* article goes on to say, "the entire local department had responded but the flames were making such headway that it was deemed advisable to call apparatus from Scituate."

The crash instantly killed three brave Scituate firemen and injured two others. Those killed were Frank Hall, Hubert McDermott, and George Burrows. Tragically, one of the two others injured in the crash was Frank Hall's son, Malcolm Hall. According to the Norwell Historical Society Archives, an old timer was heard to sadly say, "them engines, they don't drive like horses."

On August 1, 1929, in what could only be described as a cruel twist of fate, Norwell Fire Department's newly-purchased Engine 1 suffered a similar demise. Responding from the Combination 1 Engine House, the new Maxim Pumper crashed as it rounded a curve and hit a tree. Engine 1 and its crew were responding to a fire at Ridge Hill Grove on High Street.

Three Norwell firemen were injured in this crash, one severely as he was catapulted twenty-five feet over a stone wall. According to the *Boston Globe*, it happened to be the driver's first-time operating Norwell's new fire engine!

This new pumper truck was purchased to provide a reliable replacement for

Norwell's first dedicated fire apparatus (which was donated to the department several years earlier). The members of Combination 1 affectionately referred to the old truck as "Blitzen Bentz" for its less than stellar performance! The old Norwell "Blitzen Bentz" was tired, and it broke down while returning from a forest fire. (The real Blitzen Benz was a race car built by Benz & Cie in Mannheim, Germany that broke the world land speed record in 1910.)

The crash of Norwell's brand new pumper combined with resultant injuries to their brother firemen, took a heavy psychological toll on the department. It limited Norwell's firefighting capacity and created a major financial burden for the cash-strapped town. Adjusted for inflation, the \$7000 price tag for a new fire engine in 1929 is equal to \$105,194 today! For a rural community with little or no extra funds for replacing damaged equipment (and an unforeseen Depression looming) this was a major expense. Thankfully, the town was able to pay for the repairs and the damaged truck was eventually placed back into service and served the community for many years to follow.

CHANGE ON THE HORIZON

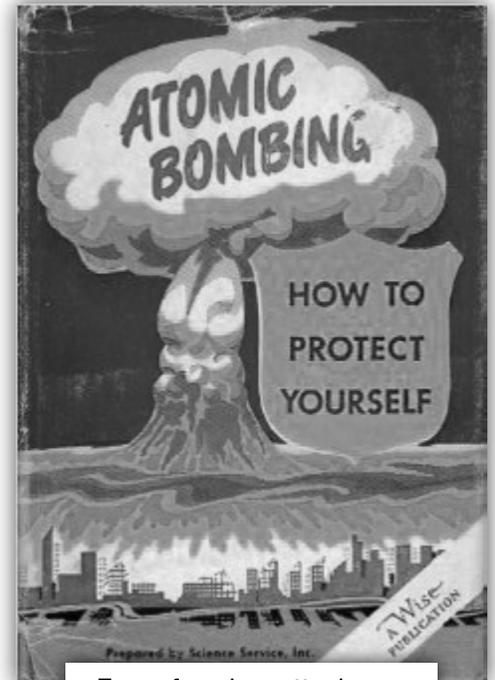
Over the course of the next several decades, the Fire Department continued to evolve and adapt to the different hazards encountered while fighting fires.

The 1930s were a very challenging time for the members of the Norwell Fire Department. The continuance of the Great Depression, the Hurricane of 1938, along with many notable fires, further defined the importance of having an organized Fire Department within the community. This decade was marked by an increase in chimney fires due to more people being reliant on firewood as a means to heat their homes during the Depression.

The next several decades brought great change to the Fire Department. World War II brought shortages in both equipment and manpower.

The 1950's saw great growth in our nation marked by the ominous expansion of Communism. Norwell

firefighters had to train for the unimaginable effects of a potential nuclear war. Norwell was still quite rural, but close enough to major military targets such as Naval Air Station South Weymouth and the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot Annex. If those targets were hit by



Fear of nuclear attack was foremost on Americans' minds during the Cold War.

Soviet nuclear weapons, the resultant effects on Norwell's infrastructure and population would have been catastrophic.

And things didn't settle down in the 1960s, as nuclear bombs were dwarfed by their hydrogen siblings. The thought of nuclear-spawned firestorms whipping through the community was a central focus for the members of

(continued on page 7)



See a photo of the Norwell Center fire of 1957 on our website. On the Home Page, scroll down to the Historic Photo Gallery and find the Buildings & Misc. Photos.

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

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_____ Researching at the Archives _____ Other:

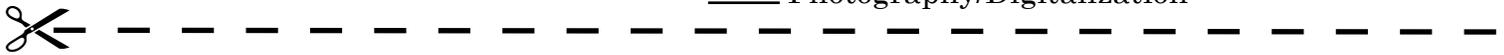
_____ Organizing at the Archives

_____ Farmhouse Tour Guide

_____ Farmhouse Maintenance

_____ Event Planning

_____ Photography/Digitalization



Fire Dept., cont'd.

(continued from page 6)

the Norwell Fire Department. This, combined with an expanding list of Fire Department services, made the need for a modern fire headquarters necessary. In the years to follow, funding was secured, and in 1968 the ribbon was cut and Norwell Central Fire Station was deemed operational. It continues to serve the town today as it will for many decades to come.

"What happened to the original Combination 1 station?" you might ask?

It was moved to Lincoln Street where it still serves as a privately-owned garage! ...Another story for another day!

Recipe

In 1960, Church Hill Cookery was published by the Women's Society of Christian Service at Church Hill United Methodist Church. Mrs. Helen Hallett contributed this Christmas recipe, and it would be a delicious addition to a holiday table today!

PEPPERMINT CHIFFON PIE

- 1 T gelatin
- ¼ cup cold water
- 3 egg whites, beaten stiff
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 cup peppermint stick candy, crushed or ground in a meat chopper
- ½ tsp. vanilla
- ½ cup heavy cream, whipped

Dissolve the gelatin in the cold water in a double boiler over hot water.

Combine the egg whites with the sugar and stir the dissolved gelatin mixture into the egg whites mixture.

Stir in the crushed candy. Fold in the vanilla and the whipped cream.

Put the mixture in a baked pie shell, and leave in the refrigerator for half a day (at least) to set.

Before serving, garnish with more whipped cream and chopped candy.



The advertisement features a black and white illustration of pine branches with several hanging ornaments. Each ornament is a small wooden sign with a circular logo at the top and text below. The logos are the Norwell Historical Society seal. The ornaments are labeled: 'SITE OF BLOCK HOUSE SHIPYARD 1701 to 1834', 'SITE OF CHITTENDEN SHIPYARD 1690 to 1871', and 'SITE OF FOX HILL SHIPYARD 1690 to 1849'. Below the ornaments, the text reads 'Add a little North River history to your holidays...'. A starburst graphic contains the price '\$20 each'. At the bottom, it says 'AVAILABLE FOR CONTACTLESS DELIVER (in Norwell) OR MAILING (\$5 S+H) Go to www.norwellhistoricalsociety.org Click on the "Merchandise" tab and scroll down to "Other Items For Sale"'



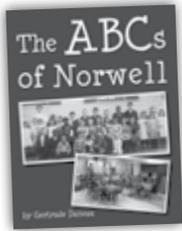
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 (perfect for holiday gift-giving!) 



The ABCs of Norwell (*shown at left*)

\$10

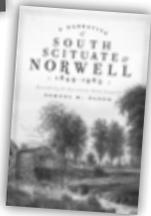
by Gertrude Daneau

A coloring book perfect for children of all ages! This illustrated book can be used as a text for teaching budding historians, or as a quick guide to Norwell's many historic people and sites.

Historic Homesteads of Norwell

\$15

Always wanted to know the history behind the antique homes in town? This book delves into the background of many of Norwell's historic houses and the people who lived in them.



A Narrative of South Scituate & Norwell (*shown at left*)

\$20

by Samuel H. Olson

This book chronicles the life and times of our town from 1845-1963 with a collection of articles previously published in *The Norwell Mariner*. Each chapter is its own story, so this book is very readable. Looking for a single book to summarize Norwell's more recent history? This is the one.

History of South Scituate-Norwell

\$25

by Joseph Foster Merritt

This history of the town, originally written in 1938, was republished in 1988 by the Society. A unique narrative with illustrations, it is an invaluable account of Norwell prior to WWII.

Shipbuilding on the North River

\$45

by L. Vernon Briggs

This large book is the definitive listing of ships built on the North River and the shipyards that lined its shores. Written in 1889 and re-printed in 1988, this book also contains stories of colorful South Shore characters and harrowing sea tales. *Limited copies available.*

All the above items are available for contactless delivery (within Norwell) or will be mailed (for a \$5 fee). You may purchase items online or you may use this form and mail a check (made payable to NHS) to: NHS, P.O. Box 693, Norwell, MA 02061.



There are more items available for sale on our website: norwellhistoricalsociety.org.

Go to the "Merchandise" tab and follow the simple instructions.