



NORTH RIVER PACKET

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

150 Years Ago: the Final Launching of a North River Shipyard Schooner

2021 marks the 150th anniversary of the launching of the last ship to be built at a North River shipyard: the schooner Helen M. Foster.

This is the tale of that ship, shown in the famous photo below.

by Janet Watson, Society Archivist

The story of the *Helen M. Foster* began in 1870 when Ephraim Snow of Cohasset approached Joseph Merritt of South Scituate (today's Norwell) about constructing a fishing schooner.

It was the custom of the residents of South Scituate and neighboring towns to take fishing trips to George's Banks to catch mackerel and cod in the fall after the salt marsh haying was done. Schooners were held in high regard for this work, and no better schooners were built than at the North River shipyards. The fishing schooners were usually owned by several men who invested in the ship and divided the profits with the farmer/fishermen at the end of the trips.

Joseph Merritt had an understanding of shipbuilding from many perspectives. He made his first fishing trip when he was only 12 years old and worked as the cook on the ship—being so small at the time that he needed help putting the heavy metal pots on the stove. He became a master blacksmith, crafting the many kinds of metal work needed for building boats. He also worked as a middle man buying ship timber, because by the mid-1800s the timber from the once verdant forests of South Scituate had run out.

Joseph Merritt was interested in Ephraim Snow's proposition, so he formed a company to build the ship

that included three other men from South Scituate—Seth Foster, Edwin Jacobs, and Elnathan Cushing.

Work commenced at the Chittenden Yard in the Fall of 1870, and the carpenters worked diligently over the winter, completing the ship in the spring of 1871. L. Vernon Briggs' *History of Shipbuilding on the North River* describes her as "90 tons, built of oak, draft 10 feet. She was iron and copper fastened, single bottom..."



This photo of the launching was taken by photographer James Williams of River Street.

Joseph Merritt's partner Seth Foster ran a successful stagecoach business, but as a descendant of the renowned Foster family who had built 52 ships at the Wanton Shipyard, shipbuilding must have been in his blood. At the time of his partnership with Merritt, Seth Foster was living with his unmarried sister Helen Maria Foster at what is now 647 Main Street in Norwell Center.

Merritt was a widower whose wife had died the year before. One imagines that the two business partners met at Seth's Main Street home and Helen caught Joseph Merritt's eye. Although he was almost twenty years older than Helen (who at 34 was probably considered a spinster), a romance developed and Merritt proposed. The relationship was to be celebrated by naming the new ship after Helen!

Helen Maria Foster as a young woman.



“One imagines that that the two business partners met... and Helen caught Joseph Merritt's eye.”

The wedding took place in April 1871 at First Parish Church. Just two months later, in June 1871, there was a festive launching of the ship attended by many prominent citizens of South Scituate. The scene was captured in a

(continued on page 5)

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.



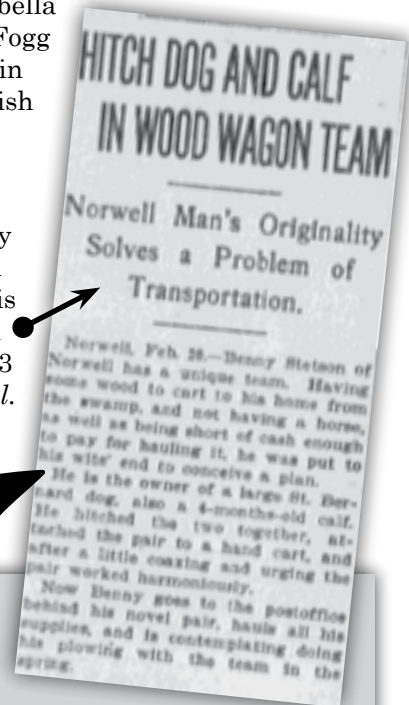
Meet Edward Jones Cox, the first principal of Norwell High School. This photo was discovered during our cataloging effort at the Archives and shows Cox seated at the center with the school's first two classes in 1888. He spent only two years in Norwell and moved around a lot. Prior to his term here, he was a principal in Dedham, then became submaster at Haverhill High School. After Norwell, Cox held leadership positions in Cohasset, Sudbury, and Boston. A local news report in 1914 described how he and his wife, Isabella Nye, were in France during the outbreak of World War I, and fled safely to London. Isabella was a native of South Scituate, and a cousin of Horace Fogg, a prominent banker in town. If you attended the First Parish Comes Alive! cemetery tour in October, you may have noticed that both Edward and Isabella are buried near the Fogg family monument in Norwell's First Parish Cemetery.



This postcard from the Archives is a Christmas greeting to Private Perry Osborne, who was serving in World War I. The Young People's Religious Union of Norwell sent the postcard which came to the Archives through the collection of Mary Osborne Knapp, Perry's daughter.



Former Society president Jon Bond found this article from a February, 1913 *Boston Journal*.



Just The Facts

Officers

Wendy Bawabe, President
Sarah Jane Baker, Secretary
Marybeth Shea, Treasurer

Board of Directors

Laurie Detwiler
Chad Forman
Christian Jevne
Daniel Neumann
Stephen O'Neill
Alan Prouty
Janet Watson, Archivist

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

Rachel Wollam

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 ONLINE!

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

A Reunion at the Archives

When the D. Willard Robinson G.A.R. Hall on High Street (now the Ridge Hill School) disbanded, many Civil War items were donated to the Norwell Historical Society. But the portrait of D. Willard Robinson (shown in the photo below) is not in our collection.

After the Civil War ended, Union Army veterans needed to connect with fellow servicemen to share their war experiences. The Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) was among the first organized groups to serve this purpose.

The G.A.R. supported voting rights for black veterans, promoted patriotic education, helped to make Memorial Day a national holiday, and lobbied the U.S. Congress to establish regular veterans’ pensions.

Norwell’s G.A.R. (Post 112) was built in the Ridge Hill area and was named after Civil War veteran D. Willard “David” Robinson. Robinson served

with his father (David P. Robinson) in Company H, 2nd Massachusetts. Both were taken prisoner and kept at the infamous Andersonville Prison in Georgia. The young Robinson died while lying under the same blanket as his father—most likely of dysentery.

G.A.R. Grand Army of the Republic. A fraternal organization composed of veterans of the Union Army who served in the American Civil War. It was founded in 1866 and grew to include hundreds of “posts” (local community units) across the nation (predominantly in the North, but also a few in the South and West). It was dissolved in 1956.

When the Norwell G.A.R. disbanded in the mid-1900s (in what exact year we do not know), most of the patriotic photographs and military paraphenalia were donated to the Norwell Historical Society.

Recently, a photograph of the interior of that hall was found in the Archives. In that photo (shown at left) was a portrait of a Union soldier, and it was assumed that the soldier was D. Willard Robinson after whom the post was named. The portrait, however, was not in our Archives.

Recently the Society was contacted by former High Street resident Ken Sennett and Claire Robinson, a member of the Robinson family. In emails with the Society they revealed that the original David Robinson portrait was still in the family.

On a recent afternoon, both Sennett and Robinson visited the Archives, bringing with them the original portrait (shown below at left) so it could be photographed for our collection. They also brought with them the Robinson family bible and much information about the Robinsons and High Street in general.



Ken Sennett (left) and Claire Robinson (right) visited the Society Archives to show the staff the portrait of Willard Robinson and the Robinson family bible.

This 1949 photo of the Ridge Hill G.A.R. Hall is in the Society Archives, but the portrait of Willard Robinson (inset) remains in the Robinson family.



Society Board member Dan Neumann was able to scan the genealogical information in the Robinson bible; Board member Alan Prouty noted his distant relation to the Robinson family; and former Society president Bob Norris, Archivist Janet Watson, and Board member Chad Forman gleaned much information from the visitors.

Thank you to both Ken and Claire for sharing their information on the Ridge Hill area and the Robinson family!

If you know of others who have historical records and stories that would be appropriate to include in the Historical Society Archives, please contact us via email at info@norwellhistoricalsociety.org.

“No Pork Hill” by Mary L.F. Nash Power

Mary Power was renowned for jotting her stories on the back of recycled paper. Recently portrayed in the First Parish Comes Alive! tour, Mrs. Power was noted as providing gems for the Archives not only with her detailed accounts of Norwell history, but with the items on which she wrote those histories. A recently transcribed article by Mrs. Power was on the back of a vintage Marshfield Fair program!

This article, written by Mary Louisa Foster Nash Power in 1943, was recently transcribed by Historical Society Board member Dan Neumann. Editorial paranthetical notes are written by Society president Wendy Bawabe.



Mary Power lived at May Elm Farm on Main Street, and wrote prolifically about Norwell history.

That part of Norwell Village surrounding the “Common” has been called “No Pork Hill” for 150 years or more. Tradition says that in some early day when no pork could be found as having been raised there, they gave to the village the name of “No Pork Hill.”

Its early name was Herring Brook Hill, from the Second Herring Brook which ran through the valley on the east. Even today [1943] one speaks of going “up the Hill,” or “down the Hill.” The center where church, library, bank, town hall, post office and stores are located in “The Hill.”

All the land around Norwell Village was “common land” until after King Philip’s War ended [circa 1676]. The river lands had been granted [to European settlers] earlier in the “up river” section between the Second and Third Herring Brooks [today’s Church Hill area], but no grant to the

westward seems to have been made until 1678 when John Barstow, son of William of what is now Hanover, was granted a large tract of land on the south side of the hill and the highway toward Assinippi [today’s Route 123] was laid out in 1673.

Barstow’s tract extended on the east from the grounds later laid out to the Second Church, to Jordan Lane on the west. His house stood a few rods south of the highway, behind the Pickles Cushing house, now the parsonage of the First Parish.

In 1680 Joseph Henchman settled at Henchman’s Corner, now Cushing’s Corner [the intersection of Lincoln and Main Streets].

Four years later, in 1684, Josiah Torrey acquired a large tract of land extending from the Second Herring Brook on the east, the highway [Route 123] on the south, Spring Brook on the north, and on the west to the present dividing wall between A.W. MacMurray and Gentry Clark. Torrey’s house was in the valley north of the hill, where the Sparrell barns and garages stand. [This area is off of Central Street today and three Torrey homes still stand at 24, 42, and 45 Central Street.]

Before 1688 or 89, “Little John” Turner, son of John Sr., who had married Abigail Padeshall (or Pattishall) of Boston, acquired the large tract between Torrey on the east, and Henchman on the west [what is today the land on the west side of Main Street near the Cushing fields]. He had lived for a time after his marriage on the north west 20 acres of his father’s property, the ancient Humphrey Turner grant of 1636.

Before 1686, Samuel Clapp had a large grant on White Oak Plain, upon which

his son Deacon Stephen Clapp resided in 1690, but “the Hill” proper extended from:

- the crest of Robbins’ hill (later so called) on the east;
- the top of Sparrell’s hill on Central Street on the north;
- on the west to Pickles Cushing’s [644 Main Street] and Dr. Barnes’ [house at 637 Main Street],
- and on the south including the church lands laid out to the Society in 1707.

The third meetinghouse of the Second Scituate Society [today’s First Parish Church is the fifth meetinghouse of that congregation] was built on the gravelly hill on the south side of Herring Brook Hill, now a sand pit, south of the enclosed tomb yard. Two houses stood on this location, the first built in 1830 on common land and [what used to be a military] training field.

The burying ground and tomb yard which occupy a considerable tract on the east side of the village were laid out by the Town in 1725. It included all the land east of the Common on River Street, where the bank and school house [today’s bank drive-thru] now stand, to Thomas Sylvester’s land at the foot of the hill on the east (land later owned by Israel Nash and now by Herbert Joseph and Mrs. Mabel Ross).

There were but few scattered houses on the Hill before 1800. Capt. Caleb Torrey, son of Josiah, built a house a little south of his father’s on the site of Alexander Black’s, probably about 1731, the date of his first marriage to Mary Bryant. His house was a tavern for many years, and was taken down in 1827. (according to Samuel Deane’s *History of Scituate*).

About 1797 or 98, Capt. Benjamin Lane, built a larger two-storied house on the main road where Cushing Memorial Town Hall [today’s Cushing Center] now stands. After a few years, Lane removed to Sherborn, Massachusetts. His daughter Lucy Lane married Ellis

(continued on page 6)

150 Years Ago, cont'd.

(continued from page 1)

famous photograph by Jim Williams who lived on River Street. As the vessel slipped in to the river, the schooner was christened the *Helen M. Foster*.

Getting a large ship down the river was quite a feat in those days, and the cost of moving it was a substantial part of the final tally. The ship was not rigged with sails until it left the river, so it had to be pulled laboriously by a smaller boat.

The tide on the North River is much different now than it was in the early 1800s. Back then, the flow of tidal water was nowhere near as great as it is today, and the builders needed high tides to make progress. Sometimes it took as many as five 24 hour days—with two high tides for each 24 hour period—to bring a ship to the Atlantic. Low tides were tricky and thus avoided.

In the case of the *Helen M. Foster*, it took five days to guide the ship down the river, and at Humarock it was so shallow that it had to be keeled over on her side so she wouldn't draw as much water in the shallow current.

The process of moving this ship clearly demonstrated the difficulties of building on the North River. Perhaps many of the people who attended the launching realized that shipbuilding days on the North River were numbered. Perhaps that is why the launch was attended by so many South Scituate luminaries. If so, they were prescient because the



Helen Foster Merritt later in life.

Helen M. Foster was, indeed, the last large ship built and launched on the North River at a shipyard.

After his final shipbuilding enterprise, Joseph Merritt continued his blacksmith business and he and Helen had one son, Joseph Foster Merritt, who grew up to love the history of South Scituate, write several books, and serve as the first president of the Norwell Historical Society.

Being a descendant of the Fosters and the Merritts, and having Torreys, Barstows, and Stetsons in his lineage, young Joseph Foster Merritt especially loved stories of shipbuilding. In his book *A Narrative History of South Scituate-Norwell* he writes,



Joseph Foster Merritt, historian, author, and the first president of the Norwell Historical Society.

"The old yards are all deserted and were they not marked by tablets, there are very few people who could locate them. No more do the old ox carts creak and groan with heavy loads of ship timber, along the narrow ways leading to the river. No more are the shouts of teamster and the sound of the saw heard on the frosty mornings. The generations that have built there have all passed on and nothing now remains of those stirring times but memories."

Acknowledgements: Much of the information for this article is taken from Merritt's book, which is available for purchase. Thanks to North River historian Paul McCarthy for his explanation of the difficulties of North River launchings in the mid-19th century.

Of note: We are eager to expand our shipbuilding collection, given the industry's central importance to town history. Do you have books or other items related to North River shipbuilding that you could donate? If so, please contact us.

Purchase Joseph Merritt's *Narrative History of South Scituate-Norwell* through our website using the QR code at right.



Dec. 31, 1864

This letter from Abial Farrar, 17, to his mother is a testament to the horrible living conditions of many soldiers in the Civil War. Abial died of dysentery one month before the conflict ended.

Dear Mother and all,

I wish you all a happy new year. I came here to my regiment... last night and spent the night in one of my friend's tents. It is raining this morning. When I got back to it I found 3 letters here for me. I will begin to answer them as I have time.

You wished me a very merry Christmas... You wanted to know if it was bad weather down here. It is most of the time. One day it rains and the mud is a foot deep, the next day it is froze up as hard as a brick. We live in tents. I thought I was writing often enough but I will try and write oftener if you want me to. I would like it if you would send me a box of eatibles as soon as you can as the other boys are having them sent to them.

Abial

“No Pork Hill,” cont’d.

(continued from page 4)

Allen of Medfield. Their son, Nathaniel Allen, a graduate of Bridgewater State Normal School, established the noted Allen School for boys at West Newton.

The Lane house was later occupied by Capt. Silas Morton from Pembroke, George Little Esq., son of Edward Little of Marshfield, and by Josiah L. James, son of William James of Scituate [and the Block House Shipyard].

Josiah James married Amelia Washburn, a sister of Mrs. Samuel Deane. Josiah L. James removed to New York City about 1818. Their son, Judge Benjamin James of Washington, D.C., was the father of Louis James, the Shakesperian actor of 50 years ago. Some years later they removed from New York to a farm in Tremont, Illinois, and later to Chicago, where Mr. James acquired a modest fortune in real estate. In 1871, he was the founder of the James Library in his native parish.



Prior to any state or federal welfare program, the Almshouse in Norwell Center housed residents who needed assistance. Today, the Cushing Center is on this site.

In 1818, the Town of Scituate [Norwell was part of Scituate until 1849] purchased for \$1,100 the house occupied by James, for an Almshouse [also referred to as an infirmary]. They enlarged it, and spent \$3,000 in alterations and improvements.

The [Alms]house was burned in 1820 by John Woodward in revenge for the town having taken his wife to the house because of ill treatment by him. He was convicted, and sentenced to State Prison for 99 years, where he died in 1828.

The Almshouse was rebuilt in 1821 at a cost of \$4000, and was used as an infirmary until 1935 when it was demolished, and the Cushing Memorial Town Hall was erected upon its site and upon the earlier so-called “pound lot.”

The Selectmen’s office was in the [Almshouse] until it was

demolished. The first keeper of the house was James Barrell, whose daughter Desire married James Newton Sparrell III.

The first keepers [at the Almshouse] whom I recollect (before 1870) were Mr. and Mrs. George Beasley, he an Englishman. The Healeys, father and son from Thomaston, Maine, kept the house for several years. The son Jairus (Jed) and his wife Huldah lived later in the Bryant-Cushing house [today’s 768 Main Street], now Mr. MacMullan’s, and later still were the keeper and matron of the Marshfield Town farm and infirmary.

My earliest recollection of the infirmary was that it had many inmates, and at an earlier period it was filled by the lame, the halt, and the blind. One family living there when my father was a boy (when children were allowed to live there until they could be placed in families and earn their own living) was that of Josiah Mann, whose wife Zilpha was not very bright. The boys of his age found much amusement in asking her how many children she had. In reply she would chant, “There’s Charles and-er Edmund, ‘Siah and-er Benjamin, Rooster (Worcester) and (crying) little Martin, he died.”

A continuation of this article by Mary Power (written in 1943) about the people and places in Norwell Center will continue in the next issue.

Recipe

This holiday recipe comes from The Norwell Cook Book: a Collection of Tested Recipes presented by the Norwell Parent Teachers’ Association, published in 1940.

SNOWBALLS

- ½ cup butter or margarine
- 3 Tbsp. confectioners sugar
- 1 cup sifted flour
- ½ cup chopped nuts (walnuts)
- ½ tsp. vanilla
- additional confectioners sugar for rolling

Cream butter with sugar, gradually add flour, mixing in thoroughly, stir in nuts and vanilla. Chill.

Form teaspoonfuls of dough into balls, place on ungreased cookie sheets. Bake in a 350°F oven for 30 minutes. Remove from cookie sheet while hot and roll in confectioners sugar. When cool, roll again in confectioners sugar. (I usually double this recipe.)

Mrs. Francis Dyer



CALLING ALL VOLUNTEERS!

Need to get out of the house on a cold winter day?

The Norwell Historical Society Archives are open **EVERY THURSDAY FROM 10:00 AM UNTIL NOON**. If you have time and talent, please stop by or email the Society for an at-home project like transcribing or on-line research.



The print storage rack at left was built by one of our volunteers! Using recycled wood, he transformed trash into the perfect storage unit for our many framed historical prints.

 **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:

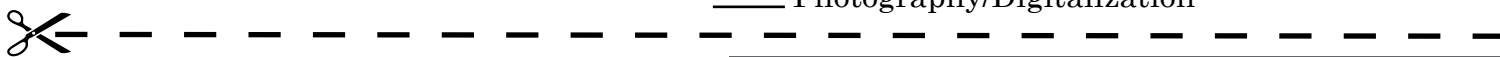
_____ Organizing at the Archives

_____ Farmhouse Tour Guide

_____ Farmhouse Maintenance

_____ Event Planning

_____ Photography/Digitalization



The new Norwell Public Library has a temperature-controlled archival storage room where the Society can now store its especially sensitive items like family bibles, old ledgers, and antique quilts. Shown here is Archivist Janet Watson, who supervised the move by Norwell High School students.

What's in a Name? NORWELL LOCALES

It's interesting to come across old names and places when reading early histories of Norwell. Ruth Perry, author of *Norwell Beautiful* mentions many old names. Society member Jon Bond summarizes a few here:

What is No Pork Hill?

This is another name for Norwell Center. Salt pork was used to flavor food, and running out of salt pork was considered an unpardonable offense. This name was considered a dig at the well-to-do homeowners in the town center. (For more information, see the Mary Power article in this newsletter about the moniker.)

Where is The Snake Pit?

Perry recalls this place on Bowker Hill where the Osborne boys went to dig out a nest of snakes and the name stuck!

What is buried at Simon's Hill?

There is an old cartpath road where Simon, a Native American, lived for many years. When he died, rumor was that he left a lot of money buried in his cellar. Perry recalls that the children of Bowker Street "hot footed" it to Simon's place, but nothing was found and the crestfallen children trudged home.

Where is Bryant's Corner?

The intersection of Lincoln Street, Grove Street, and Norwell Avenue is the location of Snow Bryant's former tavern and, therefore, where Bryant's Corner is located today.



Advertisement for historical ornaments. Three ornaments are shown hanging from a pine branch. The first is labeled 'CHITTENDEN SHIPYARD 1840 to 1871', the second 'FOX HILL SHIPYARD 1840 to 1869', and the third 'WANTON SHIPYARD 1870 to 1848'. A starburst graphic says '\$20 each'. Below the ornaments, it says 'Add a little North River history to your holidays...'. A QR code is present with the text 'Use this QR code to go directly to the Historical Society website Merchandise page'. At the bottom, it says 'AVAILABLE FOR DELIVERY (in Norwell) OR MAILING (+\$5 S+H) Go to NORWELLHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG Click on the "Merchandise" tab and scroll down to "Other Items For Sale"'. The Norwell Historical Society logo is in the top right corner.



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

Non-Profit Org.
 US Postage
PAID
 Norwell, MA
 Permit No. 10

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

December 2021

HISTORICAL SOCIETY ITEMS FOR SALE

(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.

Norwell town seal pin **\$5**

Looking for the perfect teacher gift for the coming school year? Since all faculty wear lanyards, the brass and enamel town seal pin (1-inch wide) is a great gift for your child's teacher.

Looking for more items? Use this QR code to visit our website.



All the above items are available for 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.