



# NORTH RIVER PACKET

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## Otis Safe Robbery on Wildcat Hill!

*A wealthy family, a controversial will, a slighted nephew, and a 100-year old mystery... who says there was no intrigue on the back roads of our town?*

by Janet Watson, Society Archivist

On November 17, 1949, Toiva Jarvinen, a contractor who was removing brush with a backhoe from the Wildcat region of Norwell, uncovered a large square object which on closer examination was an empty, rusty, cement-lined safe.

Mr. Jarvinen turned the safe over to the police, who consulted with some older residents of the area and determined that it was the safe stolen in 1878 from wealthy Ephraim Otis, who lived in the Otis Homestead at 191 Pleasant Street.



Ephraim Otis' safe was found in 1949 by a contractor removing brush in the Wildcat area.

This crime had largely been forgotten. But the discovery of the safe returned it to the news for a while, and a photo of the safe was given to the Norwell Historical Society with the following note:

*"Site where ancient safe, relic of a robbery in this neighborhood in 1878, was discovered buried in the ground on Green Street near Margaret's or Wild Cat Brook."*

Once again, the story receded from peoples' memories, and it is largely unknown today. But in 1878, the story was a tabloid sensation reported in newspapers across the country and as far away as Germany.

Perhaps people in South Scituate (our town was not named "Norwell" until ten years later) may have been happy to let interest in the story subside, due to the prominence of the Otis family and the fact that the perpetrator of the crime was the young nephew of Ephraim Otis, Herbert W. Otis, who grew up in the neighboring house (the John Otis House at 143 Pleasant Street).

The Otis family settled in Massachusetts in 1631. The first Ephraim Otis was born in 1708, and he built the house at 191 Pleasant Street in 1732. The house was surrounded by 200 acres that he successfully managed with the labor of slaves, accumulating additional wealth. The house was passed down from father to son and was inherited by Daniel Otis in 1816.

Daniel made his living as a compounder of drugs and producer of peppermint candy while managing the 200-acre estate and acquiring even more property. In 1870, at the age of 80, Daniel declared a personal estate of \$88,000 (the equivalent of

about \$1,700,000 in today's money), making him one of the wealthiest men in South Scituate.

In his will, Daniel left his money and property to his four living children: Ephraim, Thomas, John, and Sarah. When Daniel wrote his will, Ephraim (age 52) was single and had lived with his father for his entire life. In the will, Daniel left Ephraim railroad stock and the family homestead, along with the many acres that surrounded it. Daniel stipulated "If my son Ephraim marry and leave a child or children all

*“In 1878, the story was a tabloid sensation reported in newspapers across the country and as far away as Germany.”*

of the real estate shall descend to his child or children. But if he leave no child, in that case the real estate shall be divided equally between John's children.”

Daniel left his son, John, the house he was living in (now 143 Pleasant Street), the surrounding fields, as well as railroad and bank stock. To John's three sons, Herbert, Franklin and

*(continued on page 6)*

# 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.*



On display at the Jacobs Farmhouse Museum, the Surprise Suction Sweeper (the label is shown in the foreground above) was used to suck up dust and dirt from a swept pile on the floor (the bottom of the sweeper is shown in the background). No need to bend over after sweeping!

This ingenious machine—using vacuum technology—sucked your dust into a storage compartment. This item was patented in 1908.



Norwell resident Julia A.J. Bowker (1839-1917) never married and lived with her nephew, Edwin Torrey, on River Street. Her photo album is in the Society Archives—a beautifully-preserved, leather-bound volume with brass latches that secure the covers closed. Many of the photographs are of the Bowker and Torrey families and are labeled, including this photo of Julia as a young woman (at right).



## Officers

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The Norwell Historical Society  
P.O. Box 693  
Norwell, MA 02061  
781-659-1888 (Research Library)

# Just The Facts



## Mission Statement

The purpose of the Norwell Historical Society shall be:

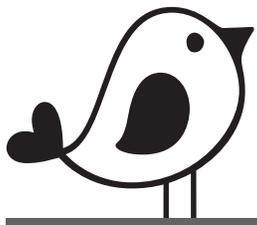
- a.) to plan and arrange for the promotion of knowledge about the Town of Norwell by discussion, research, meetings and publications;
- b.) to collect, solicit and preserve documents, manuscripts, charts, maps, records, photographs, relics, and items of local interest;
- c.) to arrange, index, catalog and file/maintain such material for use by the members of the Norwell Historical Society and other interested parties; and
- d.) to work with and cooperate with other entities, groups, organizations, and individuals directly and indirectly.

## 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 at the Norwell Middle School (328 Main Street) is open on Wednesdays from 2:30 to 3:30 during the school year or by appointment.

The Norwell Historical Society Archives Center on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the Sparrell School is open by appointment only.



**SIGN  
UP  
NOW!**

The Norwell Historical Society would like to (very occasionally...) email you about upcoming historic events on the South Shore. We will not give your information to other organizations, we want to start notifying our members and friends about historic happenings in Norwell and around the area. Please visit our website at [norwellhistoricalsociety.org](http://norwellhistoricalsociety.org) and scroll down to the “Stay In Touch” section.

## What's in a Name:

# FARROW OR FARRAR

Farrar is an English surname that dates back to pre-Christian and Roman times. The modern surname (in its many spellings) derives from “ferrum” (Latin), “ferrier” (French), and “farrier” (Middle English)--all meaning iron worker or, in Britain, a fitter of horse shoes. The name in Norwell has been spelled two primary ways: Farrow and Farrar, and today is pronounced “Far-AH” by the Farrar family.

### How far back do the Farrows/Farrars go in town?

Historian Samuel Deane included the Farrow family in his "Family Sketches" in the *History of Scituate*--mentioning that Benjamin Farrow came to Scituate (now Norwell) in 1720 and “resided near the ridged hill” (on what is today Route 53).

### Father and son fight for the North in the Civil War:

Charles H. Farrar (descendent of the original Benjamin Farrow) served in the 45th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and Abial Farrar, his son, served in the war after his father’s safe return home to High Street in South Scituate.

Abial ran away from home at the age of 15 to enlist (claiming his age was 18) in the First Massachusetts Heavy Artillery in Boston in 1864. Abial would die within 6 months of enlisting from disease near Petersburg, Virginia, and would become the youngest soldier from our town to die serving in the Civil War.

### Grace Farrar Cole School is named...

In October, 1955, the construction of a new school on Ridge Hill was begun. Serving on the School Committee at the time was Grace Farrar Cole, a Norwell native and a descendent of Benjamin Farrow. Grace had graduated from Norwell High in 1917 and Bridgewater Normal School (soon to become Bridgewater State Teaching College and later to become Bridgewater State). She became a teacher in Norwell in 1931 and taught continuously until 1951. In 1954, she was elected to the School Committee. The next year, the Town voted to build a school on High Street. Five weeks after the vote, Grace Farrar Cole died. As a tribute to a loyal Norwell citizen and a devoted educator, the School Committee voted to name the new school after her.

### A street named after the house and farm that are now gone:

Benjamin Farrow’s Cape Cod-style house from 1720 was located on Washington Street (near what is today 263 Washington Street—the strip mall with the Tease Hair Boutique). The Farrow house was destroyed by fire in 1970s. The entrance to Farrar Farm Road is near--named after the farm and house that are now gone.

## PHOTO CONTEST

### How do you remember Norwell?

The Norwell Historical Society is looking for photographs of Norwell to create a display for SummerFest 2019. Chosen photos will be posted on our Facebook page and submitted to the Norwell Mariner as part of the contest.

Do you have photos that pre-date 1960? (We have lots of photos from 1970 to the 1990's). Please take a moment this winter to look through your collection and share them with us!

Topics to look for:

- Fires in Town
- Town Celebrations
- Storms
- Everyday Iconic Norwell
- Before and After (exterior) photos of homes that are renovated or moved

To submit photos, please scan and email them to [info@norwellhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@norwellhistoricalsociety.org), and include any details about the photos and your contact information. If you do not want the photos back, you can mail them to NHS, PO Box 693, Norwell, 02061 (please label them with any details, and include your contact information).

*Answer from page 7: This windmill was located at The Old Parsonage—at 761 Main Street today.*

# The Almshouse in Norwell Center

*All histories of Norwell include references to the almshouse in Norwell Center. But most people have never heard of that building and don't know what purpose it served. The following is a primer on almshouses, in general, and our town's almshouse, in particular.*

by Pattie Hainer, Society Member

It all started with a cow.

"In 1624, secretary for the Merchant Adventurers, James Sherley of Scituate, sent the inhabitants of the Plymouth Colony one red heifer 'to begin a stock for the poor'."

## Pauper Auctions

By 1799, the town of Scituate felt there were too many poor residents and, as was the sad practice in these times, the selectmen started auctioning off the poor residents to the highest bidders. The auctions were usually conducted after town meeting at a local tavern, and the town paid for whatever drinks selectmen wanted to imbibe while doing their duty.

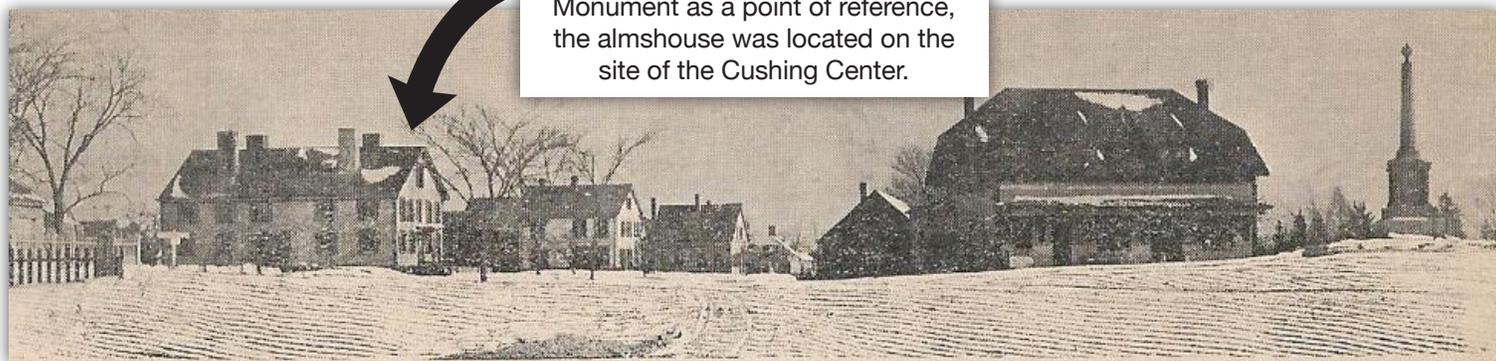


Joshua Bryant's Tavern on the corner of Lincoln and Grove Streets

One of the taverns was Joshua Bryant's at the corner of Lincoln and Grove Streets where "a large swinging sign with a black horse announced 'Entertainment for Man and Beast'."

## Almshouse

In 1820, the town of Scituate (Norwell was part of Scituate at this time)



Norwell Center in the late 1800s, looking down Main Street toward Scituate. Using the Civil War Monument as a point of reference, the almshouse was located on the site of the Cushing Center.

opened its first almshouse for care of the poor.

"Americans built more almshouses in the decades after the Revolutionary War... when auctioning off paupers became too costly and inefficient... and Massachusetts had more than any other state..."

A house owned by William James, a highway surveyor, selectman, and representative to the General Court, was purchased for \$1,100, and the town promptly spent almost as much again to remodel it.

When the almshouse first opened, a total of 47 paupers were accommodated—72 percent of whom were women and children. Soon after it opened, the facility was burnt to the ground by an enraged John Woodward, whose wife and children were being sheltered there. Woodward was sentenced to 99 years in jail for his crime.

A new expanded facility was built at the same location, including a barn and a "prison house."

Historian Joseph Merritt recalled the almshouse: "During this long period of years, the old house knew many a heartache, of people who were obliged to go there and on the other

hand many found a comfortable and pleasant home in which to end their days. ...[T]he old men used to smoke and swap yarns ... earning a little money picking oakum ... a little man cobbled shoes for the village people."

## Oakum Picking

One source of income for the facility was money earned by inmates who picked oakum, a hemp material used to seal cracks in ship hulls. The job was to remove debris so the oakum could be reused. About twelve paupers



Women picking oakum in a workhouse

each year worked at the chore. Those who fulfilled their work assignments were given one day off away from the almshouse every four weeks. Inmates earned approximately two cents per pound for their picking, which was then used to defray the cost of their care.

## E. Weston and Son

One business to which the town may have sold some oakum was E. Weston and Son in Duxbury, which made this request in 1843:

*(continued on page 5)*

# Almshouse, CONT'D

*"If you have oakum to sell from your Alms House this year, I wish you would write me as I shall be under the necessity of engaging some soon. Please to state what amount you shall probably have to dispose of, the price, and how soon you can deliver it."*

## Stables

The town also covered its welfare budget by selling off other products from the almshouse such as butter, candles, lard, tallow, pork, beef, and hides. But on November 14, 1831, the town voted to sell the old barn which housed the enterprises and to build a new one. Once built, the town rented out the new barn to a stage coach company to help defray expenses. "Inmates" of the almshouse took care of the horses.

## Home Aid

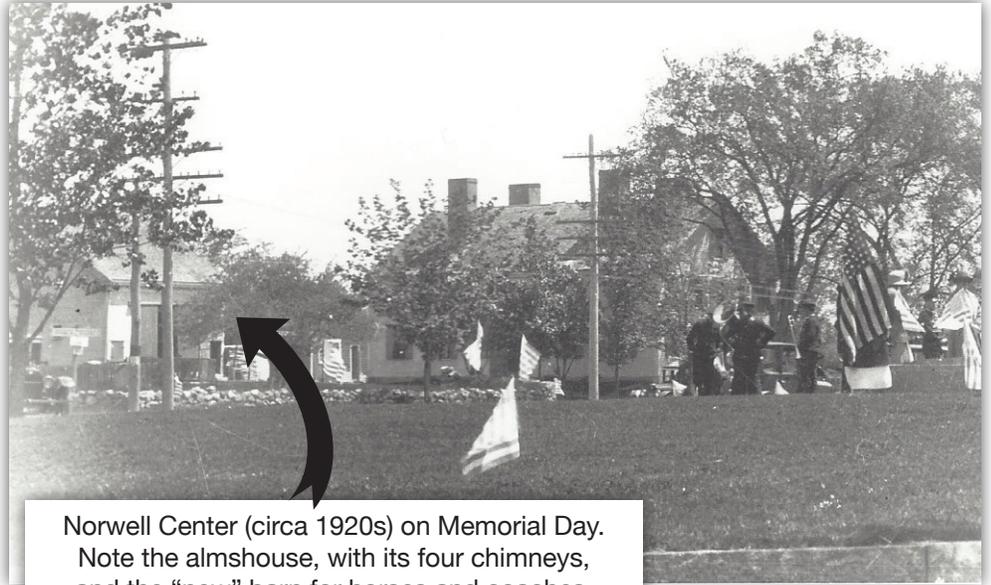
By 1849 the town had been operating the almshouse for 31 years. The numbers of poor had not changed much with a total of 42 people receiving aid in 1849 compared with 46 in 1818. In keeping with national trends in care of the poor, the town started supporting them in their own homes. The decision was largely influenced by the budget. It cost the town three times less money to care for the poor in private homes than it did in the almshouse.

## Grandison Daughters

Three of the women who were sheltered in the almshouse over the years were Mary, Harriet, and Abigail Grandison, who were close to or in their fifties when they were forced to move from their home off what is now Mt. Blue Street.

Daughters of Charles and Harriet Grandison, they were extremely disabled. "... one was born blind, another deaf and dumb and the other became blind."

So their father, the grandson of slaves who lived on Cuffee's Lane, deeded the family farm to the town to cover the cost of his daughters' care when he and his wife died.



Norwell Center (circa 1920s) on Memorial Day. Note the almshouse, with its four chimneys, and the "new" barn for horses and coaches.

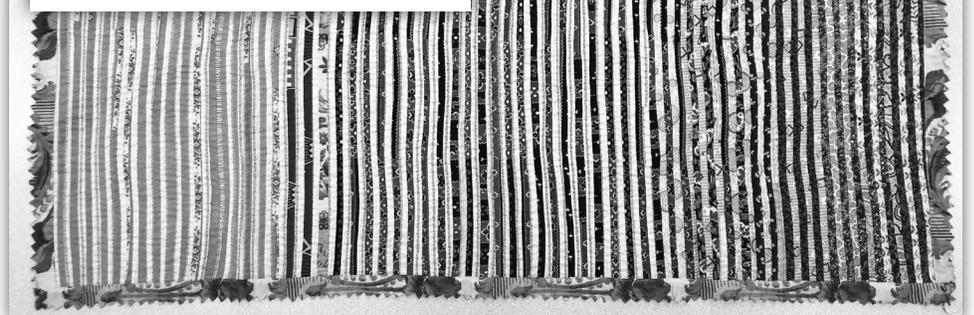
Harriet is noted in records as being a seamstress, and Abigail as someone who worked "stitching." No mention is made of what work Mary may have done.

Charles and his wife had both died by 1881, so the town sold their 34 acre farm for \$1,600 and their daughters moved to the almshouse. Harriet, age 50, died four years later in 1885. "Abby," the youngest, "lived for many years" after that. No record was found of the death of Mary.

As historian Merritt recalled:

*"Like many of the white families prominent in Colonial days, the name Grandison has ceased to be known in this town..."*

This beautiful, hand-sewn table runner was found in a closet at the Jacobs Farmhouse with a note saying: "Made by Abby Grandison of Mount Blue Street when she lived in the almshouse, circa 1900."



SAVE THE DATE!

4<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL  
**wake up  
the farm**  
AT THE JACOBS FARMHOUSE  
Saturday, May 11<sup>th</sup>  
8:00 - 11:30 am

# Otis Safe Robbery, CONT'D

Joseph, Daniel left \$9000 in stocks and bonds to be held in trust by John “to use at his discretion for the support and education of his children in a manner best calculated to preserve them from the contagious attraction of vice and folly...”.

However, two months before Daniel’s death from dropsy in 1872 [today “dropsy” is known as congestive heart failure], lifelong bachelor Ephraim married his housekeeper, Deborah Gray, who already had a child by a former marriage. This raised the specter that Herbert, Franklin, and Joseph would never inherit the family estate.

Before his Uncle Ephraim’s marriage, life seemed very promising for Herbert. He seemed to be following in his grandfather’s footsteps when he moved to Boston at age 15 in 1870 to apprentice as a druggist. In 1876, when Herbert was just 21, he was advanced \$10,000 to open his own business, “Merrick, Billings & Otis, Manufacturing Chemists.” However, at age 21 after only a few months in business, Herbert experienced failure. In April 1876 Merrick, Billings & Otis had gone bankrupt.

What occurred over the next two years is unknown, but Herbert may have hoped to still save his former business.

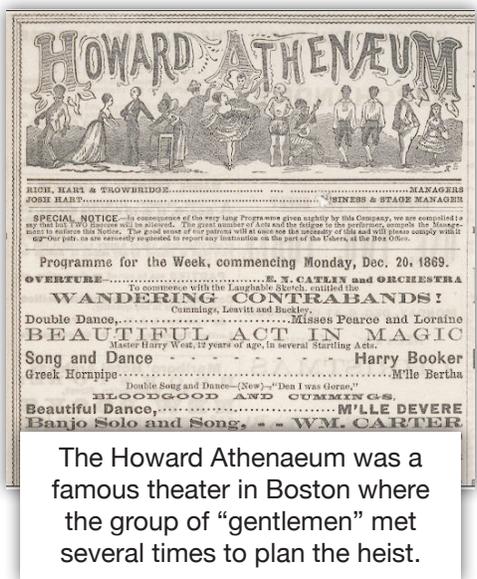
“*Jennie Walton said, “Break a safe. I’ll furnish you with good men.”*”

In early 1878, he confided to a woman named Jennie Walton about his financial problems. Jennie was described as a blonde, “a woman of the town,” and a “habitué of ill fame on Chardon Street [Boston].” Jennie is alleged to have said, “Why don’t you do some business?” Herbert asked what

she meant and Jennie said, “Break a safe. I’ll furnish you with good men.”

Jennie contacted William Ryan (aka “Mysterious Bill”) who had served time for highway robbery, assault, and shoplifting. Jennie told him she knew about a safe containing \$30,000 from a young man who said it “belonged to him and he was bound to have it.”

Ryan enlisted the help of Charles Gilman (aka “The Sewing Machine Agent”) who owned a bar room and a sewing machine shop where he fenced burglary tools on the side. Gilman was known for wearing imitation diamond pins in his neckties and spending his money on fast women. Herbert Otis told them that the safe weighed 600 pounds, so they would need four men and a team of horses to carry out the robbery. Ryan found a fourth accomplice, Charles Doherty, also a “professional” who had served 5 years in prison for robbery and 1 year for killing a soldier.



The men set up several meetings—at Gilman’s saloon on Portland Street, the Parker House, the Melodeon Billiard Rooms, and the Howard Athenaeum. One or two often didn’t appear at the scheduled time, and once when they were supposed to meet at the corner of Boylston and Tremont, Ryan didn’t come because he had been arrested. Ryan remained in jail for three weeks until Herbert paid his

fine. At one point, Ryan said he was “sick and tired of the job.” All in all, the criminals seemed to be lacking in commitment... or simply not up to the task.

But on April 8, 1878, the *Boston Globe* posted a notice of bankruptcy for Merrick, Billings and Otis. On Monday morning, April 29, 1878, in what seems to be one last desperate effort, Herbert Otis announced to his partners, “It must be tonight.”

Otis went out to search for a team of horses, Gilman and Ryan for a hammer and drill. (Later, a man named Samuel Locke would testify to the theft of his sledge hammer.)

They met at 6:30 and realized they would need a lantern. They went to a lamp store where Otis distracted the owner while Gilman and Ryan stole the lantern.

They met Doherty, but Gilman had disappeared and was nowhere to be found, so Doherty brought another accomplice into the scheme, J.F. Connors (aka Jack Connors), a professional thief who had served six years in state prison.

In the meantime in South Scituate, Ephraim Otis went to bed at 9 o’clock after locking the doors and windows.

Herbert and his accomplices drove from Boston and arrived in South Scituate about midnight. Herbert and Connors walked to the back of his uncle’s house and jimmed open a window, then opened the door for Doherty and Ryan. They rolled the safe out on a tip-wagon they had gotten from Otis’s father’s shed and carried it about a half mile away. They took out the contents—securities and stock in the amount of \$31,000, \$61 dollars in cash, and 9 silver spoons—and returned to Boston, arriving about 8:00 a.m. Then they had a beer and divided the \$61 in cash.

In the middle of the night, Ephraim Otis later testified, he had heard noises but didn’t investigate. When he awoke at 5:30, he found the door unlocked and, looking outside, he saw

*(continued on page 7)*

DATE \_\_\_\_\_ NAME \_\_\_\_\_

MAILING ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

TOWN \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

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### INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING?

\_\_\_\_\_ Organizing the Archives \_\_\_\_\_ Other:

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\_\_\_\_\_ Farmhouse Maintenance

\_\_\_\_\_ Event Planning

\_\_\_\_\_ Photography/Digitalization

Please make checks payable to:

*Norwell Historical Society* and mail to:

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



## Otis, CONT'D

marks where something had been dragged. He realized that his safe was missing.

The scene of the crime:  
the Ephraim Otis house  
at 191 Pleasant Street.



The police were notified. The safe was found a half a mile away with the door removed and beside it was a chisel. William Stoddard found a bottle of chloroform by a stone wall nearby. Edward Gammon found a sledge hammer close to the safe. Joseph Otis, Herbert's brother, found a lantern in the bushes on Green Street the following Friday. Roger Jarvinen, the son of Toiva Jarvinen who found the safe in 1949, remembers that soon after finding the safe his father found unopened jars of dynamite in the same field.

*The crime has been committed. Will the perpetrators be caught? Janet Watson will continue this sordid tale in the next issue of the Society newsletter.*

## THROWBACK

PHOTO OF THE MONTH



The last issue's Throwback Photo featured a picture of a stone water tower/windmill that once stood behind May Elms Farm on Main Street. The tower was noted as one of only four that stood in Norwell.

Former Society Board member Jeanne Elder wrote to correct us that there were, indeed, *other* windmills in town—albeit not as sturdy or long-lasting. Jeanne was told that many metal windmills were visible at homes throughout town (since there were far fewer trees, they were more easily seen).

Jeanne's former home (shown above in an undated photo with the windmill in the back yard) had a large cypress water tank in the attic. The windmill pumped the water to that tank and allowed the family to have ample water pressure.

Fun Fact: the tank was later disassembled and the cypress was used to make a coffee table!

**Do you know where this windmill and house are today?** (answer at the bottom of page 3)



NORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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Norwell, Massachusetts 02061  
[www.norwellhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.norwellhistoricalsociety.org)

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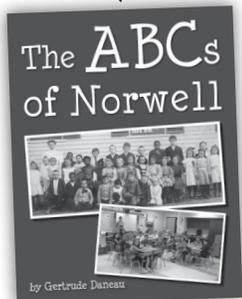
RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

wake up  
the farm

AT THE JACOBS FARMHOUSE

Saturday, May 11<sup>th</sup>  
8:00 - 11:30 am

## HISTORICAL SOCIETY ITEMS FOR SALE



**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 famous personalities and historical features.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.*

 **MORE ITEMS**  
**available online**   
[norwellhistoricalsociety.org](http://norwellhistoricalsociety.org)

All the above items are available at the Society Library in the Middle School on Wednesdays during the school year (2:30-3:30 p.m.), or you may call Wendy Bawabe at 781-659-1464, or you may use this form and mail a check (made payable to NHS + add \$5 for shipping) to: NHS, P.O. Box 693, Norwell, MA 02061.