



NORTH RIVER PACKET

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The Explosive Life of Tenney Davis

The Society recently did research on the house at 7 Central Street in Norwell Center and learned about the legacy of Tenney Davis. Who was this fascinating scientist who was one of the founders of the Norwell Historical Society?

by Archivist Janet Watson

When we watch fireworks this summer, let's think about Tenney Davis—an illustrious Norwell resident and pyrotechnics expert who lived at 7 Central Street in Norwell Center.

Tenney Lombard Davis was born in Somerville, Massachusetts, on January 7, 1890, and his parents were Thomas and Martha Tenney Davis.

He was a descendant of the Bowker family, one of the first families to settle in Scituate (now Norwell) around the area of what is today Bowker Street.

Tenney Davis inherited the house at 7 Central Street from his mother, Martha, who was the granddaughter of Homer Bowker who first lived at the spot. He lived in the home with his wife Dorothy and two sons from 1926 until his death in 1949.



Tenney's house at 7 Central Street

Davis grew up in Somerville and received his Bachelor's degree in chemistry from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1913 and his Ph.D. from Harvard University in

py·ro·tech·nics \pī·rō'tekniks\ *n.*

1. A fireworks display.
2. A brilliant performance or display, especially of a specified skill.
3. The art of making or displaying fireworks.

1917. By that time the United States had entered World War I, and Davis volunteered for the Army. He was commissioned as a First Lieutenant in the Ordnance Department, and he was assigned to the Explosives Section of the Engineering Division.

He sailed for France in June, 1918 and returned to the United States in January 1919, having acquired a lifelong interest in explosives. After the war, he was hired by M.I.T. as a professor of chemistry, and he started a career that included prodigious publications of articles and books—including the classic textbook *The Chemistry of Powder and Explosives*, published in 1941.

But his interests were not restricted to the technical science of chemistry, Tenney Davis was a linguist and a philosopher and one of the foremost historians of chemistry. In the 1930s, in collaboration with Chinese students at M.I.T. and scientists in China, he translated ancient Chinese texts about the history of Chinese alchemy and the history of fireworks, and he eventually published 112 papers on the subject.

Davis worked part-time as the Director of Research for the National Fireworks Company, which had a plant in

Hanover, Massachusetts. According to Warren Kloforn, an expert on fireworks, National Fireworks was a major producer of consumer fireworks and was very innovative, especially at the Hanover plant, in the years that Davis served as their Research Director (during the 1930s and 40s).

“No man can be so old that he fails to recall the thrills of the pyrotechnic exhibitions which he witnessed as a boy...”

National Fireworks rapidly converted their operations to a wartime footing during World War II. A statement from the National Fireworks Review in 1943 reads: “National’s part in the war effort is a well-established record.... We have gone ‘all out’ to do everything in every way possible to speed the day of victory.”

Kloforn says of National Fireworks:

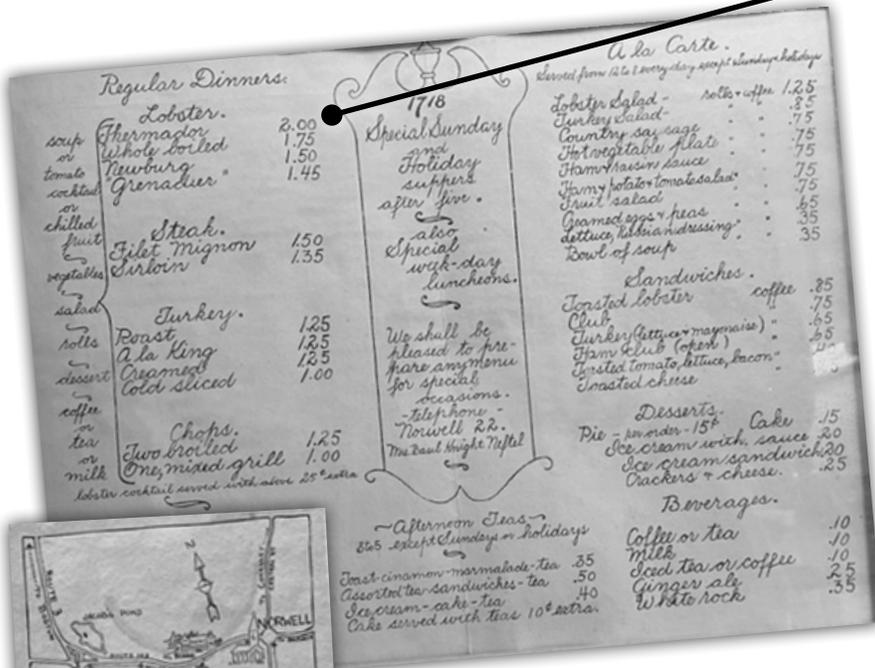
“The knowledge base required to produce items like time fuses and incendiary bombs matches very closely the knowledge base required to produce fireworks. The changeover was complete, and

(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.

This menu from the Grenadier House restaurant (which used to be located at 206 River Street) features a \$2 Lobster Thermador dinner and a telephone number of "Norwell 22." The restaurant was owned and operated by Basil and Martha Neftel in the 1930s and 1940s. The inset map was printed on the back of the menu.



These shoemaking items are typically on display at the Jacobs Farmhouse museum, but will be featured at the Norwell Public Library in a display on High Street/Ridge Hill industry. The pattern pieces were used to accurately cut leather for shoes. Look for the display at the NPL later this summer!

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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.

Administrative Consultant

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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.

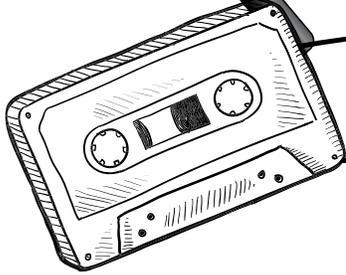
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P.O. Box 693
Norwell, MA 02061
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Look for the magnifying glasses in this issue—that means there is more to discover on-line and at the Society's website NORWELLHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG.



Oral History Transcription

Madeline (Lawrence) Farrar
1927-2022

Below is an edited interview with Madeline Farrar, who recently passed away on June 14th. The original oral history interview was conducted by Norwell student Michael Kunigonis in 1985.

Work brought my family to Norwell. My father and his whole family had moved from Nova Scotia to Quincy, and from Quincy to Norwell to do farm work. My father had been a barrel maker in Canada for many years. When we moved to Norwell, we lived on Central Street and I attended Center School in Norwell Center. You knew everybody and the teachers and everybody knew you. First and second grade were combined, and my teacher was an old maid with her bun on her head, peering down her glasses.

Since there was no TV when I was a child, we listened to radio. There were some shows on that I really enjoyed, including "The Mystery Man" – which had two detectives that would fight crime. I also read mysteries.

I had some chores around the house, but I didn't have an allowance. We would pick up bottles and recycle them and what we earned was a lot because things did not cost as much as they do now. Once I got a pair of skates but they were black, so I saved up so I could get white ones.

As a teenager, we used to do crazy things. On Mill Lane near Central Street, you could drive through to Winter Street. My friends and I would cram into two cars and play hide-and-seek while driving. Why we didn't kill ourselves I don't know, but it was fun.

We used to swim in the North River, and I hated snakes and one day one of my friends said a snake

was coming right towards me. I thought I was going to drown! I was lucky it went right by me.

We also used to go canoeing in the North River near the sand spits of Blueberry Island of Hanover. We couldn't go very far up the river because there were rocks.

I got married in 1951 to my husband, Ellsworth Farrar, and we raised our two girls in Norwell.

My husband was a fireman in Norwell, and I remember the fire siren going off and he would jump into his clothes. I would wait up all night to see what had happened. There were lots of fires at night and grass fires in the summer. I recall when the old high school burnt. It burnt like a match. Thankfully, my husband has never been hurt.

When I was young they had dances in Norwell center every week. Everyone went – now they don't have them anymore. There also used to be a doctor in town who made house calls, but not anymore.

After World War II, the town changed tremendously: more houses and buildings. Most people thought the town was going to be destroyed, but it wasn't. Things are still kind of the same. I think people are not as friendly as they used to be, the center has been burnt down, then rebuilt. There used to not be many trees in the area because of farming.

A Memorial Day celebration on Norwell town green, circa 1930.



I recall the days when the Memorial Day parade used to be in three parts. It would stop at all of the cemeteries and then everyone would move by car or bus to another part of town and there would be another parade. Then everybody met at the center of town. Many of the children carried wreaths to put on the graves. They all prayed and the band played. Now all we have is a little dinky parade.



In 1957, Norwell Center burned and was later rebuilt, as recalled by Maddy Farrar.

I began volunteering for the Norwell Historical Society in 1982. I was interested in finding out more about shoemaking because one of my neighbor's houses used to be lived in by a cobbler.

I also was a Sunday School teacher for many years at the First Parish Unitarian Church, and I enjoyed taking the children into the First Parish cemetery to look at the faces on the gravestones.



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

Norwell historian Mary Power wrote prolifically about our town, its homes, and its many residents. The center of Norwell, referred to by Mrs. Power and many of her contemporaries as “No Pork Hill,” and the peculiarities of the homeowners is the subject of this story.

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

Beginning with the December 2021 newsletter and continuing until this final installment, we have reprinted Mrs. Power’s history of Norwell Center.

When the “new” Parish meetinghouse was built in 1830, nothing stood east of the Common on River Street but the district school house [the site of the bank drive-thru today]. The present [1943] two-storied schoolhouse evolved from the old one-room district school. It seems reasonable to believe that even that primitive structure was rebuilt after 1849, when South Scituate rebuilt or improved other schoolhouses that had been in use before the town was divided.

Behind the Central Schoolhouse was “the holler,” the playground of many generations. There children slid on long, slippery dried wire grass and on shoes and barrel staves in the summer, and on sleds in the winter. This furnished sport for the short recesses and the noontime period, when pandemonium often reigned.

A path through the hollow led to the old town pump, which once stood where the small building of Harry B. Merritt

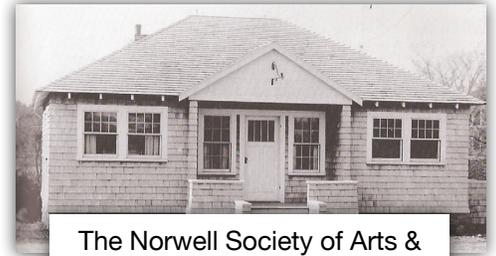
now stands [today’s Norwell General Store]. It was a coveted privilege of the older boys at the schoolhouse to go to the pump for fresh water for the noon-hour thirst, before the morning session closed.

This old pump was the water supply for the Almshouse until after the 1880s, when the supply became scanty and a new well was dug across the street and a more modern pump was installed. All the water used in the Almshouse was drawn and taken into the house by the male “inmates,” until a cistern was built to utilize the rainwater from the roof for laundry purposes. No water was piped into the house until the new well was dug for the portable State Police Barracks on the “pound lot.”

In 1849, when the old Town of Scituate was divided and the new Town of South Scituate incorporated, one of the first changes made was moving the “Town House” [town hall] to the center of the village (the Hill). The building was placed on the Common facing east—directly in front of the residence of John Nash, who was greatly disturbed by having it placed there as it completely obstructed his view of the “up river road” [River Street] and the pleasant wood view in the south. Mr. Nash, then 80 years of age, felt it a direct provocation to him personally, and damaged his property very materially.

The building was a huge barn-like structure, with its long side opposite Nash’s front windows, and the many meetings and noisy evening affairs disturbed him greatly after the quiet years in which he lived in the village.

Recruiting for the Civil War happened at the recessed entrance to the hall, which was approached by a platform and several steps. In the hall during the war, men and women sewed and gathered the articles for Soldiers Relief. It was a busy center in those days.



The Norwell Society of Arts & Crafts building, circa 1910.

In 1905, the Norwell Society of Arts & Crafts [shown in the photo above] was organized in a small building purchased from Harry S. Merritt that had been used by him for a barber shop and billiard room. This organization was quite active socially for ten years; then the membership and sales declined and the building was sold to John H. Sparrell. It housed the first State Police unit for one winter, then a portable building was placed on the lot behind the Almshouse.

Major changes on the Hill were made between 1930 and 1935. The new State Police Barracks was built in 1933, extensive alterations were done on the Savings Bank building in 1934,

(continued on page 5)



“No Pork Hill” circa 1880: Mr. Nash’s fence is shown at left and the “new” Town House, described as a “huge barn-like structure” by Mary Power, is at right. The Civil War monument was erected in 1878. The Town House ruined Mr. Nash’s view and “damaged his property very materially.”

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“No Pork,” cont’d.

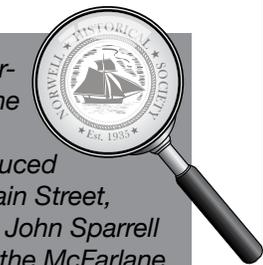
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the Cushing Memorial Town Hall and Town offices were built in 1935, and in 1940 the McFarlane garage was erected on the site of the old Merritt blacksmith shop [see the inset magnifying glass below for a video with more information on that building at 690 Main Street].

Cushing Memorial Hall was a result of the public spirited vision of Miss Florence Cushing and her desire to perpetuate the memory of her father, Hayward, and her uncle, Nathan. Miss Cushing had hoped the project would be completed during her lifetime, but she passed in 1927. A provision of her will gave to trustees the sum of \$100,000 with which to erect a memorial building and left an endowment for its upkeep of around \$30,000.

The fine structure serves the purpose for which it was intended and is a fitting tribute to two local sons of South Scituate, whose careers in the business world won them honored names and fortunes.

The Norwell Historical Society and the Norwell Historical Commission produced a video on 690 Main Street, site of the original John Sparrell Garage (and later the McFarlane Garage) for the 2021 Preservation Awards. Click here online or scan the QR code to view!



Madeline E. Farrar

age 94

passed away on
June 14, 2022

Maddy Farrar led an amazing life!
See page 3 of this newsletter
to read an oral history interview
Maddy gave with a Norwell Middle
School student in 1985.



Tenney Davis, cont’d.

(continued from page 1)

National never returned to the manufacture of civilian fireworks.”

So Tenney Davis was again caught up in the throes of war, but he remained positive about the benefits of his lifework. He wrote:

“Explosives are to be listed among the chemical substances which have been of great service to man... Although enormous quantities are being used at present for the destructive purposes of war, yet it is probably true that... ninety-five percent is used for beneficial and creative civil purposes of peace.”

One of the “beneficial and civil” uses Davis loved was fireworks. In his paper, “The Fun of Fireworks” he wrote:

“The spontaneous and long-drawn “ah-h-h” and “oh-h-h” which arise when a crowd of people is watching a display of rockets is evidence that fireworks appeal profoundly to something in us. ... No man can be so old that he fails to recall the thrills of the pyrotechnic exhibitions which he witnessed as a boy nor so old that he will not experience them again and yearn for the fun of shooting off Roman candles and firecrackers.”

Davis was one of the founding members of the Norwell Historical Society, and Joseph Foster Merritt dedicated his book *The History of South Scituate/Norwell* to him. A newspaper article about the first Historical Society meeting in 1935 quotes from a speech



Tenney Davis,
Norwell resident and
explosives expert.

given by Davis: “Regardless of what Henry Ford has said, history is not ‘the bunk’.”

Along with his house on Central Street, Davis had a small camp on Forest Street. It is fun to imagine that in Norwell in the 1930s and 40s, there were some spectacular fireworks displays!

For the last ten years of his life, Tenney Davis continued to work and publish, but his health was in decline due to a heart condition. He died suddenly of a heart attack in 1949 while driving his car on River Street.

Many thanks to local historian Les Molyneaux and to Warren K. Kloforn for providing information and images for this article.



Marie J. Anderson

age 96

passed away on
May 26, 2022

Marie Anderson attended the Ridge Hill Neighborhood History Party in 2017, and she was the primary “Answer Man” during the group Q&A. Read about Marie’s neighborhood on our website by clicking [HERE](#) (online) or scan the QR code above.

Norwell's Unique Relationship With the Cranberry

With the prospect of some of Norwell's cranberry bogs potentially being converted to house lots, the Norwell Historical Society wanted to share a brief history of the cranberry and the industry that farms it.

by Daniel Neumann

In Norwell, we are at the very northern edge of the Massachusetts cranberry growing industry. Our bogs, which can be accessed at Cross Street, are a lonely vestige of the large-scale commercial farming that defines the history of our town and marks its unique rural character. As one of the few wide-open spaces remaining in town, it is appreciated by many visitors who come to admire the beautiful landscape and wildlife.

Longtime Norwell resident Jon Bond even started a Facebook group called "Norwell Cranberry Bog," where he shares beautiful photos taken on his daily walks (see photo at right).

The future of Norwell's cranberry bogs has become worryingly uncertain, though. After about 77 years of commercial cultivation, there have been proposed plans to convert a large portion of the land into a residential real estate development.

As our town contends with the prospect of this change, the Norwell Historical Society felt compelled to share the historical significance of the cranberry industry to our town and to the region. The tale of the cranberry is a lot more interesting than you might think.

To begin, we will look way back in time. NASA can now peer billions of years into the past with its fancy new telescope, but we need to go back only 19,000 years. This is the time when the glaciers began to recede in North America. As they did, great heaps of debris were dumped and discarded, forming terminal moraines such as Long Island and Cape Cod. On the Cape and the South Shore of Massachusetts, the dumping was accompanied by some gentle dredging, when blocks of glacial ice broke free, forming shallow pits as they melted over time. These "kettles"

sealed at the bottom and filled with water and nutrients, and they became a series of fertile little crescents for wild cranberries. This serendipitous interplay of ice and rock created an ideal setting for the original seat of the American cranberry industry, centered on Cape Cod, with bogs stretching north to our own natural kettle in Norwell.

“*This serendipitous interplay of ice and rock created an ideal setting for the... cranberry industry.*”

The native Americans had a liking for wild cranberries, incorporating them into their diet, even extolling certain medicinal properties, such as fever relief and (when pulverized into a poultice) the healing of wounds. To the Narragansetts, it was called "sasemineash." Also, a dish made from crushed, dried berries and corn was called "sautauthig."

The English name "cranberry" is said to be derived from the words "crane" and "berry," as the flower and stem of the plant resembles the head and neck of a crane, a bird often found snooping about the bogs. Some early settlers even called them "bearberries" after observing them eaten by bears, but it didn't stick, and we inherited the more appetizing "cran" instead. The English were also keen on the fruit's health benefits, believing it to fend off scurvy. In 1660, Samuel Hartlib wrote

to Puritan leader John Winthrop, requesting a batch of cranberries be sent to his home in London, stating "I know not a more excellent and healthfuller fruit." Winthrop responded in the affirmative, "if it be the season for them, and [they] can possibly be procured."



A Double Crested Cormorant and a Great Blue Heron on the Norwell bogs.
Photo by Jon Bond

The cranberry became increasingly popular in the diet, with distribution spreading throughout the colonies. But the berry wasn't harvested in large quantities until a discovery was made by an observant and innovative veteran of the Revolutionary War named Henry Hall, a resident of Dennis on Cape Cod. He noticed that the spring crop of cranberries responded particularly well after spending a winter blanketed in windswept sand. He corralled a plot of cranberries, ensured they were properly covered with sand, and became the first person to cultivate the cranberry. To this day, "sanding" is a common practice among commercial growers, and Donald LeClair (who owned the Norwell bogs for 31 years until he retired in 2000) sanded his crop every three to four years.

Hall's idea was germination for the blossoming of an industry, which ripened rapidly as the practice was replicated and improved upon. By 1885, Barnstable County had 2,408 acres under cultivation and Plymouth County had 1,347. The total number

(continued on page 7)

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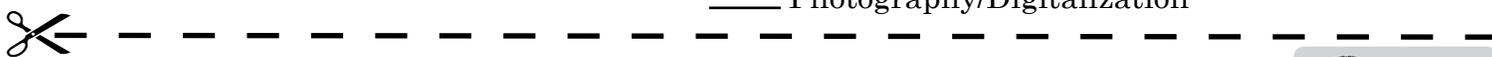
_____ Organizing at the Archives

_____ Farmhouse Tour Guide

_____ Farmhouse Maintenance

_____ Event Planning

_____ Photography/Digitalization



Cranberry, cont'd.

(continued from page 6)

tripled again by 1900. As the cranberry landed on more tables, it became a part of the culture.

Henry David Thoreau was particularly fond of them, graphically writing:

"[cranberries] literally put the heart in you and set you on edge for the world's experiences... they cut the winter's phlegm and now I can swallow another year of this world."

Herman Melville alluded to the source of Ahab's madness in *Moby Dick*:

"Go out with that crazy Captain Ahab? Never! He refused to take cranberries aboard. A man could get scurvy, or worse, whaling with the likes of 'im."

On Cape Cod, the harvest became so important to the community that children could be excused from school in order to work.

Fast forward to 2020: Nathan Apodaca modernized cranberry culture with a viral [TikTok video](#) of him blissfully enjoying a bottle of cranberry juice while skateboarding to Fleetwood Mac!

Before the implementation of specialized tools and mechanization, the crop was laboriously picked by hand. By the late 19th century, workers were made up of a wide variety of ethnicities including Finns, Russians, Swedes,

Portuguese, and Cape Verdeans—with the latter making up the majority of the workers. Indeed, Jon Bond recalls seeing Cape Verdeans work the bogs during his youth in the 1950s. Likewise, LeClair fondly describes his seasoned Finnish employee, Arthur Ahola, who was also a Scituate fire-fighter. Rounding out this diverse group, LeClair also employed people of Cambodian descent who would then work at factories in Taunton during the winter.

As the means of production grew more sophisticated, so did the industry structure, with farmers banding together into cooperatives. One of the earliest was formed in 1866 by Zebina Small of Harwich "for the purpose of mutual benefit and protection... and to promote the general welfare of the association."

Mergers, break-ups, then more mergers ensued, and the permutation that ultimately evolved was Ocean Spray—officially formed in 1930 in Hanson.

Under the leadership of Marcus Urann, the cooperative combined growing, canning, and branding of many cranberry products. Today, Ocean Spray is a behemoth—boasting over 700 cooperative families in North America and South America, with most of the production now taking place in Wisconsin.

Recipe

This cranberry recipe comes from *The Norwell Historical Society's More Than Just a Cookbook*, published in 1994.

CRANBERRY DELIGHT

- 2 cups fresh cranberries
- 2 cups sugar
- 1/3 cup chopped walnuts
- 2 eggs
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup flour
- 1 or 2 sticks of melted butter

Spread a 10" pie plate with dry cranberries. Sprinkle with nuts and 2 cups of sugar.

Beat together the eggs and the 1 cup sugar. Add flour and melted butter and beat well. Pour over cranberries.

Bake for one hour at 325°F until lightly brown.

Serves 8. Real good and real easy!

Sally Mederos

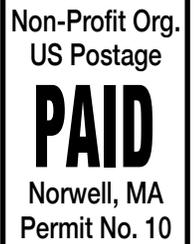
However, it was not all smooth sailing on the bogs. Labor strife, regulatory issues, and price volatility are among the hallmarks of any maturing business. It was no different here.

The "Great Thanksgiving Cranberry Scare" of 1959 was the most calamitous period, sparked by a determination by the Food and Drug Administration that [aminotriazole](#) (a weed killer used on the crop) could be potentially

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NORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Summer 2022

Cranberry, cont'd.

(continued from page 7)

hazardous to human health, and that consumption should be avoided until the industry was able to address the issue. The announcement came just before Thanksgiving, and sales of the fruit collapsed—threatening to send the industry into the throes of insolvency.

Industry management immediately claimed this was classic regulatory overreach and kicked off an aggressive PR campaign. Ultimately it was found that only trace amounts of the carcinogen were present, and by 1960, the government agreed to indemnify growers for their losses, thereby saving the industry. It wasn't until 1962 that

the price of the cranberry returned to pre-crisis levels, and even in 1969, when LeClair was considering the business, the memory of the event remained fresh, making for a difficult financial decision. It was no slam dunk.

Looking back, LeClair is glad he bit the bullet. At one point or another, each of his five children worked there, helping to significantly increase the size of the operation. These were valuable skills indeed, as LeClair counts a Navy Admiral and Hollywood producer among his children!

The bogs were first developed by the Breen family of Scituate around 1945 and, according to LeClair, they had a relative with the surname "Webster," who must have been integral to the business because "Webster Cranberry, LLC" was their namesake. The name of the business has remained the same, even as hands have changed.

It is unclear how much change is now afoot, given the proposed development plans. Some solace can be found in the fact that these are wetlands—carrying all the related restrictions on development. Further solace can be found in Plymouth and Hanson,

where old cranberry bogs have been repurposed into popular wildlife sanctuaries, namely [Tidmarsh](#) and [Burrage](#), respectively. Furthermore, the Town of Kingston recently voted to buy a 46-acre tract of property that includes an old cranberry bog and wet-lands to preserve it as conservation land.

In a recent *Boston Globe* article, a representative of Mass Audubon commented on why properties like these are becoming available for restoration:

"The decline of profitability in the regional cranberry industry began more than a decade ago with the creation of new varieties of cranberry plants that could flourish in "upland" bogs and therefore no longer required the wet lowland acres of New England. Extensive cranberry cultivation in states such as Wisconsin began to dominate the industry."

No matter what happens with the overall cranberry industry, let's hope we can maintain one of the last remaining vestiges of our town's history.

Special thanks to Don LeClair and Jon Bond for their valuable contributions to this article.

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