



NORTH RIVER PACKET

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The Battle for the North River

The North & South River Watershed Association (NSRWA) recently loaned the Historical Society the scrapbooks of Dr. William Vinal, educator, historian, environmentalist, and one of the North River's biggest advocates. This is the story of how large stretches of the river have remained pristine—in large part because of Vinal's role in the "Battle for the North River."

by Dan Neumann

The history of the North River is central to Norwell's unique identity. Much has been written about its role in shipbuilding during the 19th century. Indeed, we are the "Clippers!" It is also one of the most beautiful waterways in New England. The story of how large stretches of the river have remained so pristine is not as well-known as shipbuilding, but deserves at least equal attention.

The North River is the only river in Massachusetts that is protected under the state's Scenic and Recreational Rivers Act of 1971. Earning that designation was not a foregone conclusion. It was the culmination of decades of work to raise awareness of the environmental fragility of the river and its watershed.

"The Battle for the North River" was a phrase coined during the 1960s and championed by Norwell's own William Vinal (fondly known as "Cap'n Bill"). His scrapbook collection (six volumes totaling 488 pages!) chronicles the region-wide effort to preserve the river during the 1960s—an undertaking that was fueled in large part by his enthusiastic defense of the river's natural and historical charm.

Incredibly, by the time the battle was gearing up in the early 1960s, Cap'n Bill was in his eighties, and ten years into his retirement from a long



Cap'n Bill and his wife, Lillie, at the 1967 dedication of the William Gould Vinal Elementary School.

and distinguished career in nature education. He was a pioneer in the field, according to his biography at UMass Amherst (where he taught from 1937 to 1951)—and where a large collection of his papers is archived.

Vinal's impressive educational *bona fides* include an undergraduate degree from Bridgewater State, a master's from Harvard, and a PhD from Brown. An energetic man, Vinal taught passionately and wrote prolifically about nature, conservation, and local history. In addition to instructing college students, he also spent many summers teaching young kids at nature camps. In fact, The South Shore Natural Science Center in Norwell was started in 1962 by a group led by Vinal, and the Town of Norwell later honored his impact by naming today's "Vinal" Elementary School after him.

One of the catalysts that motivated Cap'n Bill to act on the river's behalf was the proposal to build two sewage treatment plants, one at Greenbush in Scituate, and the other in Rockland.

The Scituate plant would discharge effluent directly into the North River, and the Rockland plant into a tributary. It was 1962, and Rachel Carson had just published *Silent Spring*, a seminal book that ignited the grassroots environmental movement in the United States and set in motion the process to ban DDT. The production of industrial chemicals was surging, with mounting concern about the cumulative toxicity for humans, animals, and plants.

This being the 1960s, distrust of government authority had become prevalent, and Vinal was unconvinced that the sewage plants posed "no risk" (which was the position of Scituate's Department of Public Health). Since Norwell is located upstream from

***Silent Spring** is an environmental science book by Rachel Carson documenting the environmental harm caused by the indiscriminate use of pesticides, including DDT. The impetus for the book's title was a letter from a friend who reported the death of birds around her property in Duxbury, resulting from the aerial spraying of DDT to kill mosquitoes.*

Scituate and downstream from Rockland on the tidal North River, and since Norwell was not initially included in the discussion of the plants, it is not surprising that Norwell's voters and selectmen were aligned with Vinal's stance against the plants as proposed.

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

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

This ledger is the account book from the Torrey General Store (on River Street) from May 19, 1843 to May 29, 1845.

Housed in the Historical Society Archives, it shows the records of the sale of general merchandise including such items as molasses, oil, tobacco, cookies, cinnamon, soap, thread, fabric, candles, and black cotton hose.

The general store was not only a place to purchase goods but also a community center where residents gathered. In fact, the 1873 Annual Report for the Town of South Scituate (today's Norwell) expressed concerns that general stores were a gathering place that had negative influences on students because "profanity and obscenity are too often the staple of conversation, andhabits of idleness and vice are readily formed."



This photograph of the Jacobs Farmhouse was recently found in the Society Archives. Not only does it show the previous 2-over-2 windows (which were likely added in the 1800s), but it features two young girls in their Sunday best! Seemingly of similar age, perhaps they are Jacobs cousins?

This photograph of [Henry Barton Jacobs](#) (the last Jacobs family member to live in the Jacobs Farmhouse) hangs in the upstairs bedroom—one of many hanging in the home. It is surmised that Mr. Jacobs had his portrait taken regularly and sent to his mother, who summered in Norwell at the house. An early 1900s version of the selfie?



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.

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

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Norwell, MA 02061
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DISCOVER MORE ONLINE!

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

The “Art” of Fence Viewing

In a recent search through old Norwell Town Reports, we stumbled upon a number of Fence Viewer reports. After we read and laughed, we asked Betsy Baldwin Brink to research this historic position and choose the “Best Of” from Dr. Arthur (“Art”) Garceau’s annual missives. Sadly, Dr. Garceau passed away in 2021. He and his sense of humor are sorely missed.

by Betsy Baldwin Brink

*Before I built a wall
I’d ask to know
What I was walling in
or walling out,
And to whom I was like
to give offense.*

From “Mending Wall”
by Robert Frost

The municipal post of Fence Viewer followed European settlers from old England to new and was central to concepts of property ownership and governance.

The State of Massachusetts enshrined the concept in law in 1693. Chapter 49, Section 1 of the Massachusetts General Laws states that:

“The mayor of each city, subject to confirmation by the city council, and the selectmen of each town shall annually appoint two or more fence viewers, to hold office for one year and until their successors are qualified.”

[*Franklin Observer*, 9/17/22]

According to Joseph S. Larson (UMass Amherst) in the 2002 “Handbook on Fence Viewers and Laws on Fences in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts:”

“An old farmer’s rule of thumb is that a good fence must be ‘horse high, hog tight, and bull strong.’ But Massachusetts’ law is specific about what constitutes an adequate fence. Fence Viewers are given some discretion in the matter. Fences four

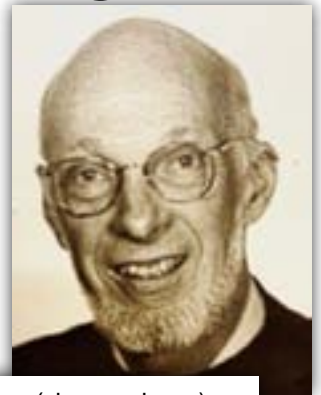
feet high, in good repair, constructed of rails, timber, boards, iron or stone, and brooks, rivers, ponds, creeks, ditches and hedges, or other things that the Fence Viewers consider equivalent, are deemed legal and sufficient fences.”

Larson continues,

“Fence viewers have the responsibility, when requested, to settle disputes over the erection, maintenance, or repair of partition fences that separate parcels of land owned by different individuals..”

“*An old farmer’s
rule of thumb
is that a good fence
must be ‘horse high,
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bull strong.’*”

In Norwell, Dr. Arthur J. Garceau served as the Select Board’s appointed Fence Viewer from approximately 1988 to 2009, when he was joined by a second Fence Viewer, Clifford Prentiss, who eventually succeeded Dr. Garceau in the solo role. During his tenure, Dr. Garceau regaled the citizens of Norwell with his colorful take on fence



Dr. Garceau (shown above) said in 2005, “I believe it was Marshall McLuhan who wrote that everyone will have his 15 minutes of fame, and I had mine last January, when the Patriot Ledger in a desperate effort to bolster a sagging circulation, put my picture on the front page in an article on obscure town officials, such as Clockwinders, Fence-viewers and Hay Measurers.”

viewing in Town Reports. In addition to reporting on his fence viewer duties, he established an award for “Fence of the Year,” among other reporting embellishments. Noted below are some favorite excerpts.

On the Fence Viewer’s “salary:”

“The duties of the Fence Viewer are not burdensome, and the salary is commensurate.” (1990)

“The fence viewer wishes to respectfully remind the town that the salary for the position has not been changed in the past forty years.” (1992)

“In 1997 the workload of this office increased so much that the Selectmen offered to triple my salary. To avoid generating

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Battle for the North River, cont'd.

(continued from page 1)

Instead, the Town of Norwell introduced three bills to the state legislature that would create a region-wide sewer authority and a much longer pipe at Scituate for discharge into the ocean.

There was fierce debate. On October 15, 1963, a meeting was held in Scituate where both sides discussed their views. According to a news report, 75 people were in attendance, including officials from Norwell, Marshfield, Rockland, and Scituate. Also present were many

“*With the whole Atlantic Ocean at your doorstep, why do you want to dump your sewerage in your neighbor’s front yard?*”

interested citizens. Representing the Norwell side, Town Selectman Herbert Repass said: “With the whole Atlantic Ocean at your doorstep, why do you want to dump your sewerage in your neighbor’s front yard?”

Representing the opposing argument was Richard Power, an official from the State Department of Public Health, who stated: “With the bacterial treatment by chlorination, 85 percent of organic material is removed—90-95% percent in summer. After a period of one day, only 10 percent of what is discharged into the stream remains and this is further reduced through dilution.”

After much debate, no resolution was achieved. Both sides remained entrenched.

The [Izaak Walton League](#), an influential environmental group, played a large role in stoking skepticism about

the safety of the plants, and it was Vinal who was instrumental in founding its North River Chapter. The league was originally organized at the turn of the 20th century in Illinois by a group of concerned fishermen, and named after Izaak Walton, a 17th century English angler-conservationist. The group was particularly focused on uncontrolled discharge of industrial waste and raw sewage: “plants cannot completely remove some of the modern chemicals which find their way into the sewage system... The new pesticides and detergents which refuse to break down during treatment will become a part of the North River.”

Dr. Arthur Garceau, who is legendary in Norwell for his civic involvement and colorful local commentary [see article on page 3], also played a highly visible role in the League’s efforts with many speaking engagements.

A defining moment in this battle was a speech given by Chief Justice William Douglas in 1964, an event hosted by the Izaak Walton League at Scituate High School. An audience of 600 people listened to his discussion on the importance of conservation and specifically the North River, according to an article from *Norwell News*.

Justice Douglas’ trip included a boat tour of the river and was part of a broader “Conservation Weekend” organized to fully capitalize on the opportunity to raise awareness of the dangers to the river. Bob Detwiler, the late husband of Norwell’s Betsey Detwiler, hosted the tour on his boat. Perhaps Douglas was trying to replicate a recent success—two years prior, in 1962, he canoed Arkansas’ Buffalo River, hosted by the Ozark Society.

Chief Justice Douglas was instrumental in Arkansas’ Buffalo River’s eventual designation as America’s first National River, which came with many protections. Nicknamed “Wild Bill” for his views on conservation, he must have hit it off with Cap’n Bill over the course of the weekend!

Despite the opposition, the Scituate plant was moving closer to reality. In

March of 1964, the Town of Scituate voted to approve its financing, and the region-wide sewer district was tabled because four of the nine towns requested not to be included.

Chief Justice William Douglas and Norwell resident Bob Detwiler tour the North River in 1964.



In the state legislature, none of the bills introduced by the Town of Norwell survived.

Activist attention had also shifted away from the Rockland plant due to the idea that discharge would be diluted given its location far upstream—and perhaps because it was not a practical staging point for a pipe to sea. Groundbreaking for the Rockland plant took place in June of 1964. Construction of the Scituate plant had also begun, becoming operational in 1967 with direct discharge in the river.

For a time, it appeared that the battle had been lost.

However, positive momentum had been brewing on another front. In 1963, the Jones Act was passed in the Massachusetts legislature for the protection of coastal wetlands. Then, in 1965, the Hatch Act became effective—protecting inland wetlands in Massachusetts by requiring certain procedures to be followed for those who intend to remove, fill, or dredge any area bordering on any inland water.

The Hatch Act was authored by State Representative Francis Hatch Jr., a Republican with an environmental bent (who later lost to Edward King in the 1978 Massachusetts gubernatorial election).

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Battle for the North River, cont'd.

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In 1972, these laws were combined into the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act and broadened to protect beaches, dunes, wetland banks, and areas subject to flooding.

Advocacy for wetlands was resurgent.

One of the most outspoken mouthpieces in our area was the [NSRWA](#). Formed in 1970, its stated purpose is to “protect our waters through education, outdoor citizen engagement, and river restoration programs.” Fifty-three years later, the group remains a strong and vital proponent for wetlands—organizing community education seminars, events, and volunteer “citizen scientist” programs. In recent years it even spearheaded a program to remove old industrial dams to help restore the natural habitat for herring, whose population is threatened.

Back in 1978, the NSRWA scored a monumental win when the state designated the North River a “Scenic and Recreational River.” The order added unique protections to the North River, to be enforced by the newly created North River Commission (NRC), comprised of representatives from Pembroke, Hanover, Norwell, Marshfield, Hanson, and Scituate. The concept of a region-wide authority, championed earlier by Vinal in the 1960s, had finally come to fruition. For the legislation to pass, it was essential that the towns and the hundreds of homeowners on the river agree to the terms, and the NSRWA’s herculean advocacy efforts during the 1970s were critical to making that happen.

Jean Foley, the founder of the NSRWA, was a driving force—even hosting cocktail parties up and down the river to spread the word and generate support. Some opposition was voiced (especially from property owners who were concerned about excessive government oversight) but the legislation ultimately passed with strong local support.

A defining feature of the order is a 300-foot-wide corridor from the banks of the river that delineates the

jurisdiction of the NRC. Strict rules apply for any activity that would alter the landscape, especially within 100 feet of the river (where virtually no new development is allowed). Fines and property liens would penalize violators.

To clinch homeowner approval, and consistent with the “recreational” nature of the order, docks were allowed to be constructed, but very little else. Central to the overall undertaking was

March, the Massachusetts Department of Marine Fisheries shut down shell fishing in Scituate and Marshfield due to a large release of only partially-treated effluent from the Rockland plant following a rainstorm. The plant has run up against its capacity limits. Officials at the plant are required to publicly disclose the discharge under The Sewage Notification Act, implemented in 2022, and fought for by the NSRWA.



The mouth of the North and South Rivers today.
Aerial photo
by Karl Swenson.

the protection of the view from the river, not from the homes. This was very successful and can be attested by anyone who has hiked along the river and enjoyed the breathtaking vistas of water and marsh. On many parts of the river, it feels so remote that it is easily forgotten how close it is to the Boston metro area.

Without its protections, the river would certainly look a lot different. The South River (which is connected to the North River toward its mouth) is not covered under the act, and is heavily developed.

Sadly, Cap’n Bill passed away in 1976, just two years before the Scenic River designation. He was, therefore, not able to witness that landmark victory in the Battle for the North River. Today, it remains the only Scenic Protected River in the state and is a treasure of nature recreation—a legacy he would surely be proud of.

Just as Vinal had warned, though, the struggle persists as population growth tests the limits of our water infrastructure. Most recently, in

A graphic featuring a circular seal of the Historical Society on the left, which includes a ship and the text "HISTORICAL SOCIETY" and "Est. 1935". To the right of the seal is a QR code. Below these elements is a paragraph of text.

Historical Society
Board member
Karl Swenson filmed
a video of the North
River—highlighting locations,
reviewing its history, and noting the
sites of historic shipyards. To [view the video](#), use the QR code above.

According to Samantha Woods, Executive Director of the NSRWA, key battles of the future for clean water will be waged against per- and polyfluoro alkyl substances (“PFAS” or “forever chemicals”) and for the dire need to strike a sustainable balance between sources and uses. The battle rages on.

Special thanks to Samantha Woods, Executive Director of the NSRWA; Gary Wolcott, Administrator of the NRC; and Betsey Detwiler for their valuable contributions to this article. 🍀

Fence Viewing, cont'd.

(continued from page 3)

wage pressures from other town employees, and after discovering that three times 0 is still 0, I refused their kind offer.” (1997)

“Because the town is facing a fiscal shortfall, the Selectmen asked me to work for 50% of the usual remuneration. I agreed to do this for one year. It will hurt me no more than Mitt Romney’s salary giveback hurts him.” (2002)

“Ever alert for an easy target in their frenzied war on spending, the Advisory Board recommends a 50% slash in the Fence-Viewer’s stipend. Several years ago, after a particularly arduous year, our generous Selectmen wanted to double my salary. With my slide-rule, I determined that 2 X 0 is still 0, but I was pleased with that recognition of worth. The same math applies this year, and though no monetary damages are done, I don’t like the implied devaluation of my services.” (2008)



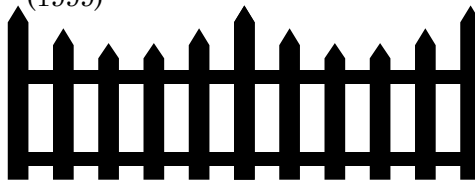
On the challenges of settling disputes:

“This has been an arduous year for the fence viewer. Of the three major fence viewing controversies, one has been sort of resolved. The second has settled into a stand-off, and the third is still locked in a three-way battle between the fence viewer and the two parties concerned.” (1993)

“I must report that another pair of neighbors, despite my efforts, wound up further from agreement and united only in their bad opinion of your Fence-viewer. You could not pay me enough to undertake work like this with results like that! So I do it for nothing.” (2005)

“Prosperity has brought to Norwell new fences to view and to fight over. I often think that the work of the fence viewer is in many ways very similar to the peace-keeping activities of the United Nations.

Borders have to be maintained and negotiated agreements frequently crash and burn. As I will be retiring from medicine soon, I am pondering offering my services to the U.N. but, if they require a success rate greater than 40%, they will not hire me.” (1999)



On serving his profession on a world stage:

“To sharpen my fence-viewing ability, I attended the International Convention of Fence Viewers in Scotland...and followed this with a ten-day seminar, Scottish Walls and Fences, Hedges and Other Barriers. ...Various persons in Town Government have urged me to permit the town to reimburse me for this trip, but I have declined their kind offer. (1993)”

“I was...able to attend my second week-long meeting of the Association Internationale de Cloture-Voyeurs (A.I.C.V.), held in the altiplano of Ecuador. 450 fence viewers from 35 developed and perhaps 20 underdeveloped countries attended the lively presentations and outdoor practical seminars. My paper, RIGHT SIDE—WRONG SIDE, a lecture on the ethics, laws, customs and regulations bearing on which way the most attractive side of a picket fence should face was simultaneously translated into French, Spanish, German, and Indonesian, and received a great deal of applause. Two days later, I was asked by the Nominating Committee if I would accept the position of Secretary to the Association. This next year promises to be a very busy one as I take on the duties which go with this honor.” (1994)

“Globally speaking, it has been a disappointing year for fence viewers. Unwise investments in Mexican Bonds led to the loss of over 40% of the funds of the A.I.C.V., and

therefore the 81st annual meeting was canceled. It had been scheduled for southern France. No elections took place and I am obliged to serve a second year as General Secretary of the International Fence Viewers Association.” (1995)

“I attended the World Congress of Fence Viewing held in England last Summer in my official capacity as Secretary-General of the A.I.C.V. (most of these international organizations have French names). At the plenary session, I was elected Vice-President, and in all probability, will be promoted to President in a couple of years.” (1996)

“I remain Vice-President of the A.I.C.V. This world-wide fence viewers organization did not meet this year owing to the indisposition of the sluggish (and slug-like) president, M. Etienne L’Escargot. However, the Pan-American section met at Batopilas, Mexico, where I presided over the sessions, firming up my connections with the Latino delegates, most of whom will support my expected election of the presidency at the next general meeting (if we can get M. L’Escargot to call one).” (1997)

“The A.I.C.V. will have its General Assembly late this year somewhere in Central America. It is expected that the Hon. M. Etienne L’Escargot will at last loosen his death-like grip on the Presidency, and that I will be elected to that post.” (1998)

“The General Assembly of the A.I.C.V. in Athens...had hardly begun when it was disrupted by a scandal involving the behavior of President Etienne L’Escargot with several nubile young delegates. He is not as slow as his name would suggest, and will remain in office as “canard boiteux” (lame duck) until next year, when I, Vice-President for 5 years, can expect to be promoted to president. Madame L’Escargot has since moved out and is running for Senate in the Poitiers district.” (1999)

(continued on page 7)

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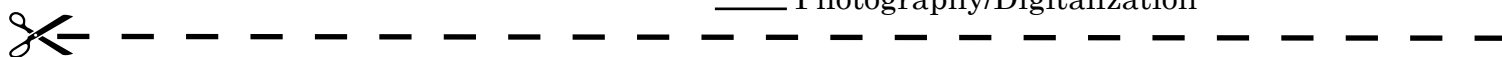
_____ Organizing at the Archives

_____ Farmhouse Tour Guide

_____ Farmhouse Maintenance

_____ Event Planning

_____ Photography/Digitalization



Fence Viewing, cont'd.

(continued from page 6)

"As the laws of the Commonwealth permit two Fence-Viewers for each town, Our Selectmen have very wisely chosen Cliff Prentiss as our second Fence-Viewer. ...It is unlikely that we will both be out-of-town unless we are both attending the meeting of the A.I.C.V. or some other convention. Even then, you may call on the Building Inspector and if he is too busy, we have arranged that the Speaker of the House of the Great and General Court take over our duties. In the event of a large-scale and truly serious disaster, the Secretary of State, Mrs. Clinton, who is fourth in line for the Presidency, will be fifth in line to cover any urgent fence-viewing duties." (2009)

The informative and entertaining reports of Norwell's Fence Viewer seem to have ended with the 2009 report, though Cliff Prentiss continues to serve in the role to the present day.



From 1990 to 2009, Dr. Garceau bestowed "Fence of the Year" to one lucky residence. His criteria:

"It must be on a well-traveled road and visible to the passer-by. (The most beautiful fence, located on

a cul-de-sac will not make it.) It must appear right for its location and right for its purpose. It must have a certain Beauty by virtue of its proportions, its elegance or its association with flowers or other plantings."

The following is a listing of the fences:

1990 – 370 River Street

1991 – 435 Main Street

1992 – 435 River Street

1993 – 271 High Street

1994 – MacDonald Motor Service (Washington Street)



This historic photo of the Delano Mansion at 370 River Street shows the former wheat sheaf-style fence, which won the "Fence of the Year" in 1990.

1995 – State Police Barracks, Norwell Center (*chiefly because of Dottie Underdown's wonderful flowers*)

1996 – 54 Grove Street (Franklin Road side)

1997 – 81 Central Street

1998 – 253 River Street (*special "de-fencing" award for "removal of the unfortunate fence"*) and 291 Summer Street

1999 – 169 Main Street (*First-ever "Fence of the Century" awarded to Norwell Center Cemetery, "honored in its past—wooden—form as well as its present—somewhat brittle plastic—form"*)

2000 – Donovan Farm property (corner of Circuit and Pleasant Streets)

2001 – 10 River Street (*Kent House*)

2002 – 793 Main Street

2003 – [no report]

2004 – 257 South Street

2005 – 120 Grove Street

2006 – 10 River Street (*2nd award*)

2007 – 387 River Street

2008 – 14 Pleasant Street

2009 – 246 Prospect Street (*Hornstra Farms*) 



NORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Summer 2023

Upcoming Events

For an up-to-date listing of events, please see the Society website [“Events”](#) page or use the QR code at right.



Norwell Underground with Dr. David Titelbaum

6:00 pm at the Norwell Public Library

Wed., August 9th

Using a metal detector, Dr. Titelbaum spent years exploring beneath our town's surface. Find out what he discovered! Dr. Titelbaum will also show some of his postcards from his historical Norwell postcards collection.

Stetson Heritage Day

1:00 to 4:00 pm at 83 Stetson Shrine Lane

Sat., August 19th

Join the Norwell Historical Society and the Stetson Kindred of America for a rare opportunity to visit the beautiful Stetson Homestead site—settled by Cornet Robert Stetson in 1634. This event includes tours of the site, activities for kids, and other special presentations.

The Archives Uncovered: Hidden Treasures of The Norwell Historical Society!

6:00 to 7:00 pm at the Norwell Public Library

Mon., September 18th

Interested in the history of Norwell? Are you looking to conduct your own research and need help finding where to start? Society Archivist Janet Watson will offer insight into recent research that has brought new local history to light and provide an overview of the local resources available to help you on your own research journey, including an overview of [Ancestry.com](#) which can be accessed for free at the Norwell Public Library.

First Parish Comes Alive! Cemetery Tour

noon to 3:00 pm at the First Parish Cemetery

Sat., October 21st

Reservations will be available via our website in September. Save the date for this annual event featuring portrayals of historic figures buried in Norwell Center.



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