

Discussion on the Upper Main Street/Norwell Village Area of Norwell

Thank you so much to Trish and Joel Shepherd for hosting us in your beautiful, historic home—known by many names! Officially known as the “Jonathan and Joseph Turner House” after its first residents, the house is also known as the “Dr. Cushing Otis House” because it was the home and office of Dr. Otis throughout the early 1800s. Dr. Otis named the property “Riverdale Farm”—yet another moniker for this much-loved and much-admired antique.

Although this house’s plaque has a date of “circa 1676,” it is believed that much of the original structure that stood in the 1600s has been renovated, disassembled and re-used elsewhere in the home, or rebuilt. What you see from the front of the house was largely constructed in the mid-1700s.

This house’s story began in 1676, when Scituate resident (remember: Norwell was part of Scituate at the time) Humphrey Turner was given an 80-acre land grant. Humphrey’s son, John Turner, established a homestead here on that 80 acres after the 1676 Indian Raid that happened during King Philip’s War. That raid was devastating to much of Norwell. A war party of Narragansetts and Nipmuks came from Hingham down what is now Route 53 to the Church Hill Area near Tiffany Road. They burned down the Stetson Mill, which was on Third Herring Brook, then the Indians came up River Street to the Block House (which was located off of what is today Block House Lane) on the North River. As an aside, a Block House was a fortified garrison where residents would go if attacked (see drawing at right). John James, the owner of the land on which the Blockhouse stood, died the day after the attack from his injuries. The Indians then moved up Main Street across what is today May Elms Farm and toward Parker and Cross Streets, burning several houses along the way, and continuing to the Blockhouse at Greenbush Pond in Scituate.



Soon after that Indian Raid, John Turner built a small home on this site for his two sons: Jonathan and Joseph. In about 1701, Jonathan moved his large family to a new house closer to the North River (that house is located at 19 Upper Ferry Lane today—the home of Betsey Detwiler). Jonathan would later fight in the Revolutionary War as a commissioned officer. Joseph Turner and his wife, Bathsheba Hobart, remained in this house with their small family and Turner family members continued to live here until about 1803. During their time in this home, the Turners built the basic structure of Riverdale Farm.

I'm going to chat further about this house at the end of my talk and Jonathan Detwiler from Buttonwood Renovations is also here—Jon is the contractor who restored much the home.

I'd like to give everyone a very brief history of Norwell, its naming (and re-naming), and of Norwell Village and the Upper Main Street area.

Settlement of what is Norwell today began in 1634 (only 14 years after the Pilgrims arrived) when Cornet Robert Stetson and his wife Honour were granted land on the North River in the vicinity of what is today called Stetson Road. A "Cornet" is a military title—Robert Stetson was a flag holder in a mounted unit and was considered a high-ranking official in town. The Stetsons were among the original "Men of Kent" who settled in Scituate Harbor after originally arriving in Plymouth from Kent, England. While most of the other Scituate residents stayed in the harbor area, the Stetsons decided to make their fortune "up river" in Norwell. And they are the first known settlers in our town.

The Town of Scituate was officially incorporated in 1636—two years after the Stetsons came up the river. At that time the boundaries of Scituate included all of Norwell, parts of Hanover, and parts of Marshfield.

In the early- to mid-1600s the main "highway" through town was the North River. Hence, most settlers lived on or near the river. The original Indian paths included what-is-today Main Street and Washington Street (Route 53). So it is easy to imagine why Norwell Center became a popular area—being next to the intersection of an important Indian Path and the North River.

What we know today as the Town of Norwell broke off from Scituate in 1849 and established itself as South Scituate. There are many theories as to why we separated from Scituate, but the prevailing belief is that the interests of the "inlanders" varied greatly from those of the "coast dwellers"—the primary difference being how to manage the town's money.

About 40 years later, in 1888, the town was again renamed—after Boston businessman, South Scituate Savings Bank president, and summer resident Henry Norwell. Mr. Norwell pledged \$2,500/year for 10 years to the town for road maintenance. When a vote was taken on a new name, "Norwell" won hands-down.

Now on to the history of this area in particular. You may have noticed that there are signs on either end of Norwell Village (on Main Street near Lincoln Street and near Union Street) that welcome people to the "Norwell Village National Register Historic District." There has been a

lot of confusion about what these signs mean. Unlike Hingham (which has many Local Historic Districts that regulate the exteriors of the homes within them), Norwell has no Local Historic Districts. A National Register District has no “teeth” legal-wise. In other words, homes within the district are not at all regulated regarding exterior changes. The only regulation for old homes (and this is true throughout Norwell, not just in this District) is regarding demolition. If a historic home is slated for demolition, the Norwell Historical Commission (not the Society—which is sponsoring this event—but the Commission) is asked to review the demolition request and they may postpone demolition for a year. The Village National Register District came about in the 1980s when a group of Main Street citizens wanted to create a Local Historic District but there was a lot of push back from residents. As a compromise, the National Register District was created. It is, essentially, an honorary title only.

Norwell Center has a few notable historic buildings that I’d like to point out, and one that no longer stands, but is still very important to the history of our town:

- The Bank: The brick edifice we know today was built in 1922 and then completely remodeled in 1934. The first banking was done at the home of bank Treasurer Horace Fogg (he lived in one of the two large white colonials after the Town Center on this side of Main Street).

Prior to the bank in the center being built, Mr. Fogg had



a store on the site (the dark building in the wide photo of Norwell Center at right). There was a major fire in 1884 and the building was rebuilt as a combined bank and store with “Fogg’s Hall” on the second floor—an assembly hall for dances and shows. The 1922 brick building was built around the old frame of the 1885 structure.



- The Fire House: The current building was built in 1968—not very historic. There used to be a small fire station on this site, however, but that building was moved to Scituate and the building shown in the photo was built in its place. This building was moved in 1968 to the corner of Lincoln Street and Norwell Avenue when the new (current) station was built.



- The Bank Drive-Thru: Why am I mentioning a drive-thru and parking lot? Because that site used to house Center School which would later become Norwell High School. In the two



photographs (at right) that show the school as part of the Town Center you can see the earlier one (with the school looking slightly yellow), and the 1950s-era photo showing Center School at the end of its life. We believe the building was demolished in 1960s.



- The Almshouse: The site of the Cushing Center used to be the location of South Scituate's Almshouse. The Almshouse served as a home for the poor in town. Residents' taxes helped to pay the expenses of running the building and, in exchange for food and a place to sleep, the men cut wood and the women cooked and cleaned. Originally built in 1818, the building was burned down three years later by a John Woodward, who was angry with the overseers for placing his wife there. Woodward was sent to jail where he died.



In 1821, a new Almshouse was built with four chimneys (a fireplace in every room!) at a cost of \$4,000. That price included a barn and a prison house with wooden cells (which is noted to have temporarily held "local offenders, tramps, and violently insane people").



Historian Joseph Merritt has a quote that (for me) sums up the Almshouse: "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."

There was also a small room at the front of the building set aside for Selectmen's meetings and it was customary for the Selectmen to eat at the Almshouse on meeting nights. The building was used until 1935, when it was torn down and Cushing Hall was

built. The latest issue of our Society newsletter—which we brought with us tonight—has a wonderful article on the Almshouse with great photographs.

Moving toward Scituate down Main Street, I'm going to touch on a few notable houses that played important roles in Norwell's history.

"May Elms" is located at 841 Main Street—just a few houses away from Riverdale Farm where we are tonight. Built by Elijah Curtis, Jr. around 1783, this house is best known as the residence of Rev. Samuel May, who lived there for only five years—between 1837 and 1842. Rev. May was a Unitarian minister at the First Parish in (what is today) Norwell Center. He was a renowned abolitionist, a suffragist, and (most importantly) a proponent of the Temperance movement. He organized a group of local children that marched in support of prohibition and were known as his Cold Water Army. They paraded around town accompanied by musicians and carried colorful temperance banners, reciting in unison:



“So here we pledge perpetual hate... to all that can intoxicate!”

Rev. May and his group exerted pressure and caused five of the six rum dealers in town to close. When the sixth dealer finally closed, Rev. May loaded the rum supply onto a wagon and drove to a large field near his home, which he called the “Field of Waterloo.” Here, cheered on by the children, he swung an ax and split open the barrels!



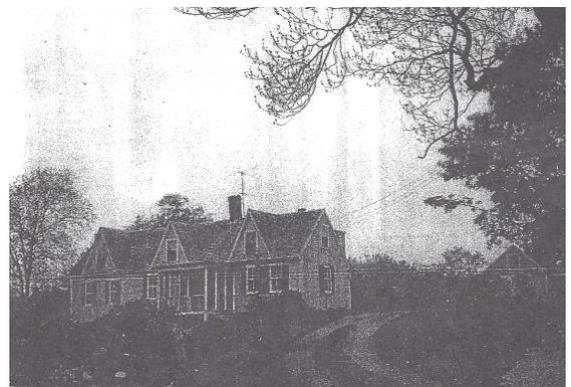
May Elms Farm had a beautiful stone water tower and windmill at the top of its fields. In the 1980s, the tower caught fire and burned (see photo at right).

Between May Elms and Riverdale Farm is an antique Cape built by Benjamin Nichols—the home of Kirk and Ted Ryan today. The house was built circa 1834—when Nichols, a ship carpenter, married Sophronia Pincin. House dating is an imperfect science (hence we often say “circa”) and dates usually coincide with marriages (one gets married and needs to move out of their parents' home) or deaths (if one parent dies and the other needs to remain in the

house, but the children have now inherited... a new home is built!). Benjamin and Sophronia Nichols had six children, including two sons named Addison and Elias who both enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War. Elias, a blacksmith, was taken prisoner in 1864 and there the record of him disappears. Both Elias' and Addison's names appear on the Civil War monument in Norwell Center as having died in the war.

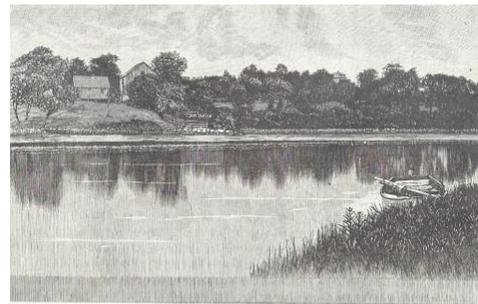
Further down Main Street lies the Dr. Isaac Otis house—located at 997 across from Arrowhead Drive. Dr. Otis was a graduate of Harvard, and he married Deborah Jacob (sister of Joshua Jacob who built the Jacobs Farmhouse). In 1719, the year after Dr. Otis married, the town of Scituate voted to pay him 100 pounds to remain in the town and be the local doctor. The Otis family lived in that home until the mid-1800s.

The house at Stony Brook Farm (set back from the road but visible from Main Street) is not an antique, but was built in 1984 when the original Stony Brook Farmhouse was demolished and the land was subdivided. The Farm's original barn was kept and renovated. Stony Brook Farm was first developed around 1640 by John Winter. Samuel Deane's book *History of Scituate* notes that "in 1651, John Winter was found dead, and Walter Baker was arrested on suspicion of murdering him, but was cleared." It was noted that Winter's house was spared in the 1676 Indian Raid, and his heirs lived in the home until the 1700s when the Briggs family bought the property. The Briggses owned Briggs Shipyard which was located just over the Scituate line (today) off of Neal Gate Road. The ship *Columbia*—the first American vessel to circumnavigate the globe—was built at the Briggs Shipyard. Around 1843, Stony Brook Farm was purchased by the Ford family, and Henry Coleman Ford (known as "Stony" to his friends") was one of the last Fords to live on the property. The demolished house was a beautiful Cape-style home with three front dormers in the Gothic Revival style. At right is a blurry photograph of the house, circa 1960.



The final house I'll mention is located today at 1081 Main Street—built by Henry Briggs in 1813. This home was perfectly located to overlook the Briggs Shipyard—considering there were almost no trees at the time and the view to the river was clear. Henry's son, Henry Briggs, Jr., was also a shipbuilder at Hobart's Landing (right near the Briggs Yard) and at the

Wanton Shipyard down the river. At right is a photo of a drawing of the Briggs Yard showing the original workhouse. The drawing comes from the book *Shipbuilding on the North River*.



BRIGGS' SHIP-YARD AND HOBART'S LANDING.
(Showing the original workhouse on the left.)

The North River is famous for its shipbuilding, and this section of town was the home to many shipbuilders because of its proximity to the Briggs Yard, Hobart's Landing Yard, the Brooks Tilden Yard, and the Block House Shipyard. The shipbuilding industry flourished in Scituate—mostly in the 1700s and in the early- to mid-1800s. Over 1000 ships were built on the North River (and many more small boats not counted in that number). The last large ship built on the river was the Helen M. Foster in 1871—I brought a photograph of that ship's launching.

Why was shipbuilding so prevalent on the North River? Especially this far up the river (over 10 miles to the mouth of the South River which, at the time, was the only outlet to the Atlantic prior to the Portland Gale of 1898). It didn't seem practical to me to build ships this far upstream when river frontage was prevalent closer to the mouth—it's much easier to launch a large ship from Scituate than from Chittenden Landing and upriver in Hanover!

There are three major reasons why the upper North River was so popular for shipbuilding:

- 1) Weather closer to the mouth of the river (and closer to the ocean) was unpredictable and windy. Having a half-built ship up on stilts was precarious—you didn't want to have to worry about ocean storms.
- 2) Building a ship upstream only required one trip down the river to the ocean. So although it was more difficult, it was only a one-time issue.
- 3) My new favorite term: "The Marriage of Resources." When two raw materials are required for any manufacturing process, proximity to both of those materials can choose your location for you. Shipbuilding required lumber and iron. Our town was filled with forests, and it was close to the ponds and bogs of Pembroke and Hanover—the source for iron. Iron was scooped out of the ponds, large "pigs" of iron were made for each shipyard, then brought via the North River to the shipyard to be forged on site into spikes and nails.

In 1831, Samuel Deane wrote the book *The History of Scituate*, and in it he notes the following about shipbuilding on the North River:

The North River... has been famous for the education of shipwrights who have emigrated and established their business along the whole coast from New York to the farthest boundary of Maine. Scarce a shipyard can be visited... without meeting many workmen who were educated at the North River.

It's fascinating to me that the only bridge to cross the North River in our town is Union Bridge. (Of note, apparently there was a movement in 1898 to create a new bridge near what is today Stetson Road, but the town voted against it.) Initially, a ferry allowed residents to cross the River—the first one was established in 1633 by Elisha Bisbee. The ferry served as the only crossing method until the first bridge was built in 1802.

Now back to Riverdale Farm: In 1803, the house and land were purchased from the Turner family by Dr. Cushing Otis, who extensively renovated the home and expanded the front west parlor for his medical practice. Dr. Otis added two bedchambers on the second floor and he probably added the east porch with the Chinese Chippendale railing.

The next major renovations to Riverdale Farm occurred in the mid-1800s when Dr. Otis' daughter, Abigail, took over the house and added the large barn on the west end. At right is a photo of the house in the late 1800s showing horses on the front lawn and the newly-built barn.



In the early 1900s (the Colonial Revival Period), the flooring in the front two formal rooms was replaced with heart pine and the 3rd floor was made into living space. Until the mid-1990s, there was still a working hand pump and well in the kitchen!

Up until the 1990s the only real window to the backyard was from the dining room, so the North Hall was expanded and a wall of windows was added in the back of the kitchen to view the yard. A first floor bath was also created in the existing barn space using the flooring and bead board salvaged from an old porch. At this point, it was decided that the hand pump was no longer needed in the kitchen—the copper sink, however, remains in the butler's pantry!

In 2014, the Shepherds and Buttonwood Renovations formally finished the 3rd floor, updated the bathrooms, and completed a major addition to the kitchen and master bedroom.

There is so much history here at Riverdale Farm, in Norwell Center, and on Upper Main Street. I love that the Town Green and the cemetery once served as grazing fields for livestock. I'm thrilled that most of the shipbuilder's homes still stand. And I find it fascinating that there's still only one bridge crossing the North River in Norwell.

Norwell may not be as fancy as Cohasset or have beaches like Scituate, but we have a wonderful rural history that is still visible today. Historian Joseph Merritt referred to every townsman, prior to 1900, as a "farmer of sorts." He said "most people kept a horse, one or two cows, a pig and poultry. Whatever occupation or trade the householder had outside of this, the family lived almost entirely on what was raised on his place." I think it's important to remember that when looking at Norwell Center, which today seems comparatively crowded to much of the rest of the town. Prior to the 20th century, the homes in this area all had small gardens and kept animals—even wealthy shipbuilders and doctors like the Briggses and the Otises.