



NORTH RIVER PACKET

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Venus Manning of South Scituate

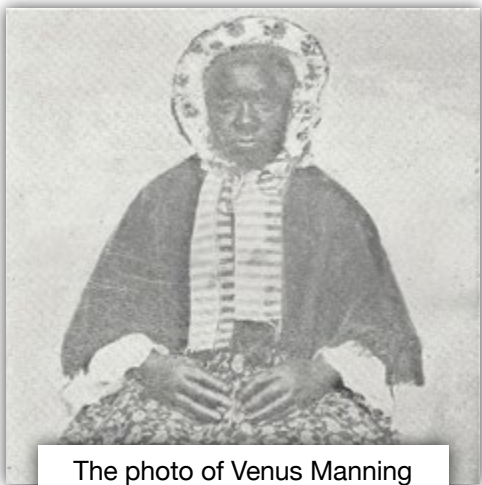
February marks Black History Month, but telling the stories of Scituate and South Scituate African-Americans can be difficult as written accounts are few. Extensive research has uncovered the story of Venus Manning, born in Scituate (today's Norwell) in 1777.

by Wayne Tucker

Wayne Tucker is a South Shore native currently residing in Rockland. His research and writing on slavery in Plymouth County and beyond can be found at his website, called *Eleven Names Project: Recovering Enslaved People of Massachusetts* (click on the QR code at the end of this article for a direct link to the website).

On page 58 of Joseph F. Merritt's 1928 book titled *Old Time Anecdotes of the North River and the South Shore*, a curious photo of a Black woman named Venus Manning exists with no context. Who was this woman who could afford to have her picture taken in the 19th century?

Readers of Merritt's book learn nothing beyond the fact that Venus was "An Early Resident of South Scituate," as



The photo of Venus Manning from Merritt's *Old Time Anecdotes of the North River and the South Shore*.

the caption describes. But Venus, as it turns out, lived an exceptional life that included slavery, shrewd financial skills, and abolitionist activism.

Venus's digital footprint is near-nonexistent. An internet search yielded little beyond a birth year of 1777 and confirmation that she was born in Scituate. Her year of birth and her first name hint that Venus may have been born into slavery, as Massachusetts did not abolish slavery until 1783, but her freedom status at birth was mere speculation.

Thankfully, Venus Manning left a robust probate file that yields clues to a life well lived. An item in her last will and testament dictates that "...said remainder to be administrated as follows, first to render such assistance to Ichabod, James, Catherine, and Patty Sylvester, children of my deceased brother Fruitful Sylvester." Venus mentioning her brother Fruitful Sylvester by name unlocks a huge clue to her identity.

Historian L. Vernon Briggs tells us in his well-read *History of Shipbuilding on the North River* that Fruitful Sylvester was born in Scituate (today's Norwell) enslaved:

One of the characters of the time was Fruitful Silvester. He was a negro born of a slave in the service of a Mr. Sylvester who lived on the Chittenden place during the Revolution. He died about fifty years ago [circa 1839] and will be remembered only by

the older people. He worked for the Fosters in 1820, and to show what wages were at that time he was paid for "Killing, cutting up and salting a cow, 62 cents." "For shearing six sheep, 36 cents." "Cutting two cords of hard wood at Grey's Hill, \$1.00," and other labor equally cheap. He was known the country round. (p. 255)

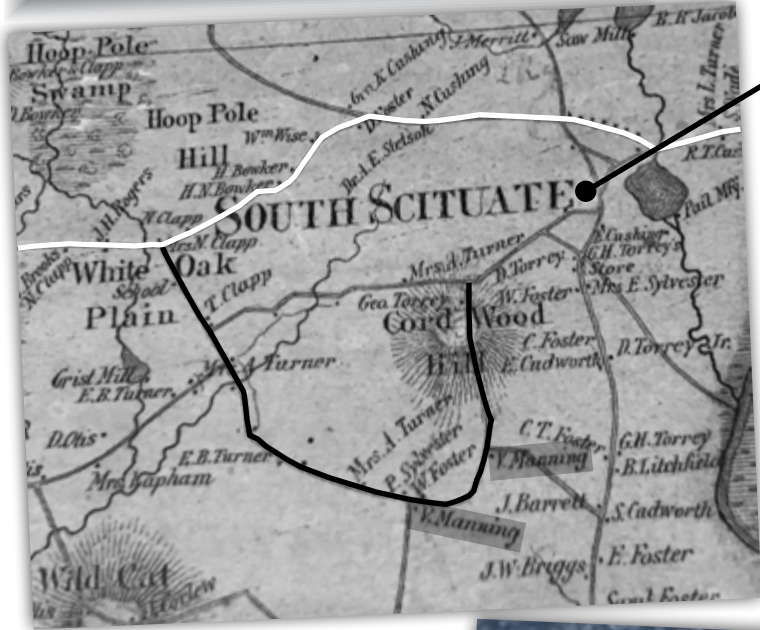
“*at the time of her 1860 death... she was amongst the wealthiest single women in the town of South Scituate.*”

Through Fruitful Sylvester we can build a Sylvester family tree. Venus and brother Fruitful had four sisters, Catherine, Edna Hittie (Mehitable), and Rhoda. Despite Venus and her five siblings being born into slavery, she boasted an impressive estate at the time of her 1860 death and, as a single woman, she was amongst the wealthiest single women in the town of South Scituate. Her estate was appraised at \$3,375.95—if an online inflation calculator is to be believed, this would be \$112,000 in 2022 dollars. Furthermore, in 1859 and 1860, Venus was taxed at a higher rate—\$19—

(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.



The 1857 map of Plymouth County identifies the homeowners in South Scituate (today's Norwell). Commonly referred to as "The Walling Map" because it was created by American civil engineer, cartographer, surveyor, and map publisher Henry Francis Walling, one hangs at the new Norwell Public Library—donated by The James Library and First Parish Church. The Historical Society Archives also has copies of this very large (over 25 square feet!) map.

The photo at left shows a close-up of the Walling Map—specifically the Circuit Street area (the street outlined in black). Main Street is outlined in white. "Cord Wood Hill" is the hill at the intersection of Forest and Circuit Streets. Venus Manning (see the article starting on page 1) owned two homes, highlighted in this photo, on Circuit Street.

A cache of reverse images on glass (similar to old photo negatives) was found in the Archives. This picture was labeled "Thomas House, corner of Grove and Washington." The 1903 map of Norwell shows Alpheus Thomas living in a large home on the site of what is today the 7-11. This undated photo, perhaps, shows that home—long since demolished.



Want to find your neighborhood on the Walling Map? Click [HERE](#) to see the map online. Zoom in to view South Scituate in the upper portion of the map.

Just The Facts

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The **Jacobs Farmhouse Museum** is open at scheduled events and by appointment only. Please contact the Society to schedule a tour.

The Norwell Historical Society **Research Library & Archives Center** on the 3rd floor of the Sparrell School (322 Main Street) is open on Thursday mornings from 10:00 am until noon or by appointment.

Administrative Consultant

Rachel Wollam

Mission Statement

The mission of the Norwell Historical Society is to discover, preserve, and celebrate Norwell history through stewardship, education, and awareness—engaging our community, both present and future, to be vested in its history.

Mailing Address & Phone

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



DISCOVER MORE ONLINE!

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

Private Asher Freeman of the Continental Army

What motivates a former slave to enlist for three tours of service in the Continental Army? The Cushing family's revolutionary spirit had a marked effect on Asher Freeman—soldier in the 10th Massachusetts Regiment.

by Alan Prouty

This article honors the experience of Asher Freeman, who was born into slavery in Scituate (today's Norwell) in 1754 and served as a free man and soldier in the Continental Army for six years during the American Revolution.

As the Vital Records of the Town of Scituate inform us, Philis, "a negro of Doc. Otis," and Tack, "a negro of Jos. Foster," had their son baptized with the name of "Asher" in the Second Parish Church of Scituate (now the First Parish Church of Norwell) on June 2, 1754.

Asher spent his early childhood in the home of Doctor Otis (now 997 Main Street in Norwell), but when he was still a small child he was transferred to serve Nathan Cushing, a friend and neighbor of Doctor Otis. His new home was in the Cushing homestead, which used to stand at the corner of Main and Lincoln Streets. Asher worked from an early age at the Cushing homestead and was provided with the necessities of life, but had no formal schooling and could not read or write.

The Cushing family was active in the independence movement and Nathan Cushing's brother, Doctor Lemuel Cushing, was among the first from Scituate to enlist in the Continental army. He served as a surgeon of the 23rd Regiment, but was killed on

October 26, 1776 during one of the first engagements with British forces.

During the winter of 1776-1777, the Continental Army was in a tenuous state and in need of reinforcements

This sign on Main Street (near Lincoln Street) marks the site of the Cushing homestead where Asher Freeman was enslaved.



to change the course of the war. The call went out to all thirteen states to mobilize reinforcements. Massachusetts responded, and on March 1, 1777, Asher, with Nathan Cushing's agreement, enlisted to serve for three years in the Continental Army. Only free Blacks were allowed to enlist, so Asher was granted his freedom. At the age of 23 years, he celebrated the occasion by adopting the surname of Freeman.

Asher Freeman was sworn in as a Private at Boston on March 5, provided with 30 days rations, and ordered to march with other recruits for 11 days from Boston to Bennington, Vermont to join the 10th Massachusetts Regiment. There, in the 10th Regiment, Asher met Simeon Grandison and others from Scituate.

Two months after he had enlisted in the Army, Asher's first son was born on May 5, 1777. He and his wife, Dinah Comsit Cato, gave their son the name Lemuel Freeman—perhaps remembering the doctor from the Cushing family who had borne that name and had given his life in the cause of the revolution.

“Asher celebrated his freedom at the age of 23 years, adopting the surname of Freeman.”

Asher's regiment was commanded by General Gates, who was charged with preventing the British forces moving south from Montreal under the Command of General Burgoyne. The two armies met at Saratoga and after heavy fighting, the Continental forces emerged victorious. General

(continued on page 5)

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

Norwell historian Mary Power was renowned for jotting her many stories about town history on scraps of paper. This account of Norwell Center (an area called “No Pork Hill” by Mrs. Power and others) was written on the back of an old Marshfield Fair program!

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

The December 2021 issue of the Society newsletter has the first installment of this tale.

This section of the transcription gives the history of the home at 661 Main Street—in which Mary Power’s Nash relatives lived.



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

John Nash built the Nash Homestead [today’s 661 Main Street] on the main street side of the Common in 1796. He was the youngest son of Noah and Elizabeth (Cudworth) Nash of the Egypt section of Scituate... His father died in the Army at Roxbury during the winter of 1775, leaving a wife and family of six children. The two oldest sons, Israel and Noah Jr., were in the army later where they contracted “consumption” (tuberculosis) from exposure.

Returning from the service to their home in Scituate, [Israel and Noah] brought with them the germs of that fatal disease from which all of the family, except John the youngest, died. The local physician advised the sorrowing mother to send this young lad from home, before he, too,

contracted the dread disease, and when he was about twelve or thirteen years of age, [John Nash] was sent to live in the family of Nathaniel and Alice Cushing (of the Cushing Homestead) [today’s 575 Main Street] in the south part of town.

When John became of age in 1788, he started out for himself by buying a quarter acre of land north of the Common [from] Caleb Torrey, upon which he built a small one story building and in it opened a general store selling all kinds of merchandise, with a sign “Groceries and West India Goods” over the door. His business must have prospered by frugality and good judgment, for six years later, on his marriage to Deborah Cushing (the oldest daughter of Nathaniel) [with whom he used to live]... built a large two story house, attached to the west side of the store building [in 1796].



This undated photo of the house at 661 Main Street shows the original store structure (at left) built in 1788, and the large colonial home later built in 1796.

This house [today’s 661 Main Street] was the family home for two generations, until after the death of [John’s] daughter Miss Eliza Nash in 1908—two months before her 100th birthday.

When Deborah [Cushing] married [John Nash], the year of her father’s sudden death, she took with her to her new home her youngest sister Betsey Cushing—then only five years old.

Deborah died a few weeks after the birth of her youngest son Israel in 1811, and her young sister Betsey (then 20 years old) with her niece Deborah Nash (aged 14) reared the family of six brothers and sisters. **John King**, the oldest brother, then 10 years old; **Nathaniel Cushing**, 7; **Henry**, 5; **Eliza**, 3; and **Israel**, the baby, 7 weeks.

Aunt Betsey was the only mother that Eliza and Israel ever remembered, and all the children were devoted to her, and cared for her as long as she lived.

Until 1810, the half acre of land upon which his house and store stood was all the land that John Nash owned. But after the death of Dr. David Barnes, he purchased from the estate the dwelling and farm lands [today’s 637 Main Street].

John Nash retained most of the [Barnes’] farm and woodland and sold in 1811 the house and some land bordering on the main street to Capt. Isaac Whittemore. This is the house of the late Horace Tower Fogg.

Some time during the next eight years, Josiah Leavitt James was associated with Mr. Nash in the business of the store, and when he [moved] to New York City in 1818, James proposed to [son] **John King Nash**, then 17 years of age, that he accompany him and seek his fortune in that city. Leavitt James was enterprising and adventurous, and many people in his native town considered him a little foolhardy. John Nash [Senior] persuaded his son that he would be better off to stay at home and take over his father’s business. [John, Sr.] promised [the store to his eldest son] when he, himself, should retire within a few years—as he was then over 60 years of age.

John Nash retired from active business before 1828, when on February of that year the newly created South Scituate post office was established, and John King Nash appointed as it’s first Post Master.

Nathaniel Cushing Nash, the next younger son, went to Boston a little before reaching [18] in 1825,

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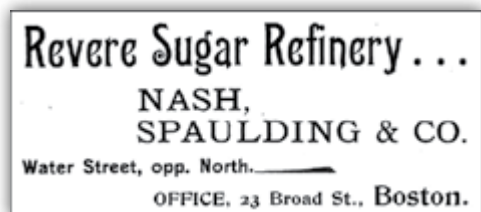
“No Pork,” cont’d.

(continued from page 4)

and worked for Joshua Sears in his wholesale grocery business. In 1829, when his youngest brother **Israel** was 18 years old, [Nathaniel] took him to town with him, and [Israel] too, entered Sears’ employ as “boy”—opening the store mornings, sweeping and sanding the floors, and other minor jobs then expected of apprentices.

A few years later, Nathaniel Cushing Nash went into business for himself, and took [Israel] with him. The new firm was Davis & Nash, situated on old Long Wharf. After a few years the firm became Nash, Hitchcock & Co, and later Nash, Callender & Co. Wholesale Grocers.

Before the Civil War it became Nash, Spaulding & Co., and this business connection continued until the death of Mr. Nathaniel Cushing Nash in 1880. When Nash became associated with the Spauldings... the former firm separated. Nash, Spaulding & Co. purchased the old Revere Sugar Refinery Plant in Charlestown, and gave all this firm’s attention to sugar.



[At the same time], Nathaniel and Israel formed another company known as I. Nash & Co. This firm became one of the largest importers of teas in Boston.

The fourth brother **Henry**, who was older than Israel, was a carpenter by trade, and a particularly skillful workman. (A mahogany veneered workbox made by him for his sister-in-law, Mrs. John K. Nash, is preserved in the Kent Memorial House [30 West Street].) Henry went to Boston where he learned his trade and worked at it for some years. Later, Henry was associated with his brothers in the tea business.

Asher Freeman, cont’d.

(continued from page 3)

Burgoyne and his entire force surrendered on October 16, 1777, giving the Continental forces their first decisive victory of the revolution and dramatically changing the course of the war.

That winter Asher marched with his regiment to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania to join the Continental Army commanded by General Washington. The Continental Army, now comprised of some 12,000 men, spent six months encamped at Valley Forge. During that time, they received military training to improve their performance on the battlefield, but they also endured hardships due to shortages of food, blankets, clothing, and shoes.

In the spring of 1778, General Washington maneuvered the Continental Army to engage with the British forces that were evacuating Philadelphia to fortify New York. Asher was among those troops that successfully engaged the British forces in the Battle of Monmouth.

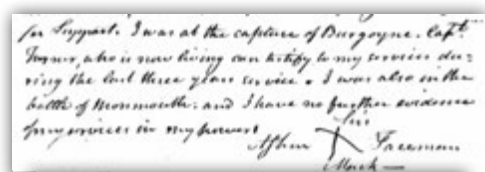
Asher Freeman completed his three year enlistment with Colonel Marshall’s 10th Massachusetts Regiment on March 3, 1780, and he returned to his wife Dinah (the daughter of Sarah Comsit, a Massachusetts Indian).

On July 22, 1780, Asher Freeman re-enlisted with the 10th Massachusetts Regiment for a period of six months. When that assignment was completed, he re-enlisted again for another three years with the 10th Massachusetts and served in New York, principally patrolling the upper Hudson River area to prevent British forces from disturbing transport across New York. His regiment was furloughed on June 12, 1783 at New Windsor, New York and disbanded on November 3, 1783.

When the revolution ended in 1783, Asher and many of the 5,000 men of color who had served in the cause of independence returned to their original towns and cities. Asher Freeman returned to his wife Dinah and worked as a laborer in Scituate and Hanover. Their family grew to include two daughters and four sons.

That same year, a ruling by Justice William Cushing of Scituate (a cousin of Nathan Cushing) resulted in the status of all slaves in the cities and towns of Massachusetts to be changed to “free persons.” In 1790, the first census of the U.S. found that no slaves were living in Scituate, although many former slaves were identified as living with their former masters as free men.

In 1818, Asher Freeman was granted a pension of \$8/month by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for his service in the Revolution. His application was written by someone concerned about his welfare, as Asher could not write and signed with an ‘X’ to authenticate the form.



Asher Freeman received a pension of \$8/month for his service in the Continental Army.

Asher Freeman died in 1820. His grave is found in the Hanover Center Cemetery. The graves of his wife Dinah and his son Lemuel (and several other descendants of Asher Freeman) are found in the First Parish Cemetery in Norwell Center.

Reference Material used in this research includes:

Deane, Samuel. *History of Scituate, Massachusetts from its first settlement to 1831*. Boston, 1831.

Hainer, Pattie. *Slaves, Servants and Free People of Color in Scituate-Norwell: 1635-1875*. 2014.

Hainer, Pattie. *The Black Community of Scituate-Norwell: 1638-1800 – Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverances*. 1995.

Moretti, Lynne Geever. *Slavery in Scituate, Massachusetts 1673-1790: A Benign Servitude??*. M.A. Thesis, University of Massachusetts. Boston, December 2002.

U.S. Compiled Revolutionary War Military Service Records, 1775-1783.

Massachusetts, U.S. Wills and Probate Records, 1635-1991.

U.S. Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Application Files, 1800-1900.

Venus Manning, cont'd.

(continued from page 1)

than most of her fellow South Scituate residents.

Her wealth accrued because, no doubt, beyond Fruitful Sylvester, none of the Sylvester siblings had children; subsequently, the siblings were able to transfer money and property to their survivors. Venus was the last of the six Sylvesters standing.

But acknowledging that Venus may have inherited some wealth from her siblings should not discount Venus's own industriousness. Records from 1805–1841 show that Venus was baptized, married, and banked in Boston and later resided in neighboring Roxbury. Records from Baldwin Place Baptist Church report Venus's Baptism in 1805. She married Thomas Manning at the same church in 1809. And extant records from the Provident Institution for Savings show both Venus Manning and Thomas Manning making deposits.

Venus was financially literate. Her probate file further reveals that, upon return to her hometown and presumably after her husband's death, she held dividend-paying accounts at the Scituate Savings Bank and the South Scituate Savings Bank, and she also owned and collected dividends on 3 shares in the Boston and Albany Railroad. Beyond that, she held a \$200 note against the town of South Scituate. The note against the town is further attested to in South Scituate's annual report for 1860.

Strikingly, Venus had a philanthropic streak. The two most frequent places that Venus appears in the record are donations to the Baptist Missionary Society and the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, the latter of which she was a Life Member. Furthermore, her will left \$200 to the Methodist Society of South Scituate (a church that her nieces Patty and Kate helped found and which is now known as Church Hill United Methodist). Her will also left \$200 to the Boston's Baldwin Place Baptist Church for the expressed purpose to "promote the cause of abolition of slavery in these

United States." This is yet another one of countless unwritten examples of African Americans pushing from below to pressure white society for abolition.

Despite Venus not having children, she had a family tree. Not much is known about her husband and it appears she returned to South Scituate a widow, but her will indicates that she viewed Norwell's African-American community as extended family. Besides the children of her brother Fruitful, Venus's probate file mentions many other people, including members of the Lee, Gunderway, and Winslow families.

One notable beneficiary of Venus Manning's will is Benjamin F. Lee, a Civil War veteran who served with the famed Colored Troops of the Massachusetts 54th Regiment. Additionally, Venus left her share of her house to Benjamin's father, George Lee. This house would have stood on a six-acre property near today's 246 Circuit Street at the corner of Pine Street (see the map on page 2).

The "Find-A-Grave" website lists Venus Manning as being buried in Norwell's First Parish Cemetery, but there was no photo. Additionally, I was disheartened to find that Venus does not appear in the well-known *Old Cemeteries of Southeastern Massachusetts* book which contains transcriptions of headstones in cemeteries across Plymouth County. The book had an entry for Fruitful, but not Venus. I feared Venus's final resting spot may have been lost to the ages. Doubtful but nonetheless diligent, I visited First Parish Cemetery and was rewarded: Venus rests alongside Fruitful Sylvester, his wife, and her four sisters.

As a fitting and beautiful postscript to Venus Manning's life, four years after her death we find an item in an 1864 *Boston Advertiser* notice that describes the Baldwin Place Baptist Society dispatching a \$100 gift from the "Venus Manning Fund" for "the relief of the suffering Freed Colored People of the Mississippi Valley." The language concerning the "Mississippi Valley" indicates that this gift was likely given

to the Massachusetts Freedman's Aid Society which provided support for the formerly enslaved people who migrated to Boston and for Black educational programs across the country.



Venus Manning is buried at First Parish Cemetery in Norwell Center.

Many questions remain about Venus Manning's life. Who were the parents of Venus and her siblings? Why is Thomas Manning so elusive and what was Venus's life like in Boston and Roxbury? Although those questions are presently unanswerable, we can say that Venus Manning was born into slavery before the Revolution and, through a purposefully-lived life, she was an abolitionist who improved life for once-enslaved people in the post-emancipation United States.

162 years after her death, Venus Manning is reshaping how we remember the impact of Black families (and Black women in particular) on early Norwell, and she is also reshaping who we remember as abolitionists.

To visit Wayne Tucker's website, click [HERE](#).

The site features more research and stories on slavery and Black Americans in Massachusetts and on the South Shore, and has a virtual tour of the North River Black Heritage Trail.



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INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING?

_____ Researching at the Archives _____ Other:

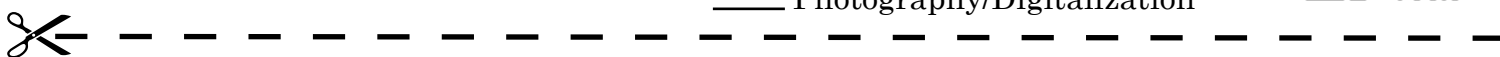
_____ Organizing at the Archives

_____ Farmhouse Tour Guide

_____ Farmhouse Maintenance

_____ Event Planning

_____ Photography/Digitalization



“Roving Archivist” Grant Received!

The Archives reorganization project was recently given professional advice through the Massachusetts “Roving Archivist” program.

Peripatetic archival workers are variously called field archivists, circuit riders, itinerant archivists, or field service representatives. New England prefers the more romantic “roving archivist”...

Quote from *Back Roads and Best Practices: Roving Archivists in New England* by Rachel Onuf & Sarah-Jane Poindexter

On December 1, 2021, the Norwell Historical Society was excited to welcome professional archivist Tom Doyle for a site visit to our Archives and Research Library as part of the Massachusetts Roving Archivist program. This grant award was made possible through the Massachusetts State Historic Records Advisory Board (SHRAB—see inset at right) and the National Historic Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). Typically referred to as The Massachusetts Roving Archivist Program, these grants connect local stewards of historical records with a trained professional who provides evaluation and advice.

Mr. Doyle commended the work that the Society has done over the last

couple of years (by many of our faithful volunteers) to complete the collections survey. Knowing what artifacts the Society has and cataloging those items in a manner that enables us to easily find them was the first (and most time-consuming) step.

Mr. Doyle followed up his visit to the Archives with a comprehensive and enormously helpful report that contained detailed recommendations on what needs to be done next. The report suggested revised policies and procedures, proposed arrangement

S.H.R.A.B. *Massachusetts State Historic Records Advisory Board.* The central advisory body for historical records coordination in Massachusetts.

and description of records and artifacts, recommended preservation planning, notes on emergency preparedness, and recommendations for setting priorities. As a result of the extensive report, our “to do” list has grown exponentially!

As an all-volunteer program lacking a professional Archivist, this report



The Society has a new computer, document scanner with foot pedal controls, and photo scanner in the Archives.

gives us the confidence to go forward knowing that we are following best practices to preserve Norwell’s historic records and artifacts.

Much appreciation goes to volunteer Archivist Janet Watson for applying to this wonderful program.





NORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Winter 2022

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 historic people and sites.
- Historic Homesteads of Norwell** **\$15**
 Always wanted to know the history behind the antique homes in town? This book delves into the background of many of Norwell's historic houses and the people who lived in them.
- A Narrative of South Scituate & Norwell** (*shown at left*) **\$20**
 by Samuel H. Olson
 This book chronicles the life and times of our town from 1845-1963 with a collection of articles previously published in The Norwell Mariner. Each chapter is its own story, so this book is very readable. Looking for a single book to summarize Norwell's more recent history? This is the one.
- History of South Scituate-Norwell** **\$25**
 by Joseph Foster Merritt
 This history of the town, originally written in 1938, was republished in 1988 by the Society. A unique narrative with illustrations, it is an invaluable account of Norwell prior to WWII.
- Norwell town seal pin** **\$5**
 Looking for the perfect teacher gift for the coming school year? Since all faculty wear lanyards, the brass and enamel town seal pin (1-inch wide) is a great gift for your child's teacher.

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



All the above items are available for delivery (within Norwell) or will be mailed (for a \$5 fee). You may purchase items online or you may use this form and mail a check (made payable to NHS) to: NHS, P.O. Box 693, Norwell, MA 02061.