

# The SOCIETY PAGES

HARSENS ISLAND / ST. CLAIR FLATS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



## Happy Holidays!

**to all our Members and Friends**

**Songs That Tell A Story**  
by Thomas Gordon  
*see page 2*

**Ice Harvesting**  
*see page 5*



### From the President

Dear Members,  
On Tuesday November 19, on the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, **Thomas Gordon** presented the program: **"Songs That Tell A Story"** from the Civil War. I am truly sorry if you did not attend this program, you missed a fascinating presentation, an extraordinary storyteller and an opportunity to learn more about one of the most important periods in U.S. history. You will see photos of the collection of original music artifacts that was on display and the brass horn that was played in the Civil War in this edition.

We hope you enjoyed your Thanksgiving Holiday with family and friends. The Historical Society Board of Directors extends their wish to you for quiet, quality time with your family and friends this Holiday Season.

Our Museum curator and operations manager, Nancy Boulton, has scheduled the second annual **Cookie Walk-Sale** for Saturday **December 7**, starting at 10:00 AM and continuing until the cookies are gone. Purchase a box or cookie tin of your choice and size; and, walk the table of donated fresh baked cookies and fill your selected container. This event was a great deal of fun and a big success last year . . . and one thing you won't want to miss is the delicious aroma as you enter the Museum . . . it is just incredible!

Be safe, stay warm and healthy this Holiday Season and don't forget about those less fortunate.

Happy Holidays,  
bernard

## The Society Pages

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## Songs That Tell A Story

as presented by **Thomas Gordon**

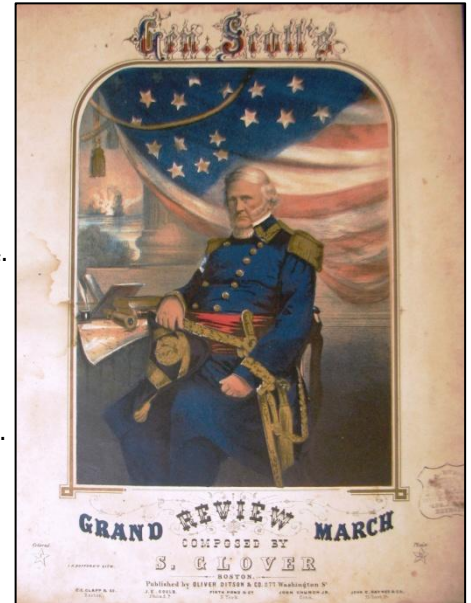
### Lt. General Winfield Scott

Not many know much about this great American hero. Born in 1786 in Dinwiddie County, Virginia, he joined the United States Army in 1808, retiring in 1861. He served as General-in-Chief longer than any other person in the history of this country.

General Scott led his men into battle during what I call the hyphenated conflict, the War of 1812-1815. Our Star Spangled Banner would come out of the engagement at Chesapeake Bay, Maryland on September 13-14, 1814.

Known as "Old Fuss and Feathers" because he demanded attention to details. He demanded precision and execution of orders exactly as instructed. He also believed a soldier's appearance was critical. His military battles were extensive. Serving as General-in-Chief during the Mexican-American War (1846-48) under President James Polk, Scott left his desk in Washington, D.C. to personally take command of 8,500 men who would defeat Santa Anna during several major battles. In September of 1847, Scott captured Mexico City, leading to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, resulting in the United States taking possession of 55% of Mexico's property, including the annexation of Texas, New Mexico, California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, and parts of Wyoming and Colorado.

When the Civil War commenced in April 1861, General Scott was still Commander-in-Chief, nearly 21 years after being appointed to that position. He knew his age would not permit him to work in the battlefields alongside his men. At the age of 75, and weighing over 300 pounds, the soldiers had to help boost the "Grand Old Man of the Army" up to the saddle.



He decided to retire his position, wishing to be replaced by General Robert E. Lee. Lee declined, stating his loyalty to Virginia, and leaving his services with the United States Army, to fight against his country. Scott would eventually be replaced by General George Brinton McClelland, but General Scott was not done yet with his service to his country. He remained in contact with General Grant throughout the duration of the Civil War, offering advice for the General. At the war's end in April of 1865, Grant commented, "The Union would not have won the conflict had it not been for the efforts of Lt. General Winfield Scott.

With the Civil War's conclusion now complete, General Scott passed away one year later on May 29, 1866 at the age of 79, in West Point, NY, where he is buried. In my opinion, he was the greatest General in the history of the United States.

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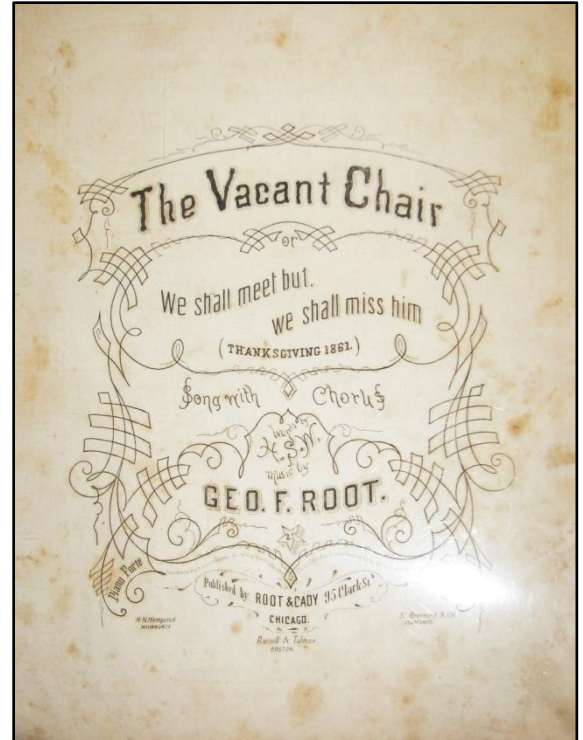
## Songs That Tell A Story *continued*

as presented by Thomas Gordon

### The Vacant Chair

The heaviness of impending conflict was sweeping the Nation, long before the Civil War exploded into all-out war at Fort Sumter in April of 1861. Songs like *I Wish I Was In Dixie Land*, written by Dan Emmett, became one of the great rallying tunes during that war. Along with *Battle Hymn of the Republic* (Julia Ward Howe, written in November of 1861, published in *Atlantic Monthly* in February of 1862), these two songs represented the “new” National Anthems for both sides. Other events took place that gave birth to the words that would keep America singing for over 150 years. *The Vacant Chair* is one of these songs. I have told the story behind the words a hundred times and I'm still touched by the words.

Lt. John William Grout was killed at the Battle of Balls Bluff near Leesburg, Virginia, on October 21, 1861. He was just 18 years old. That Thanksgiving, his absence at the dinner table encouraged a friend to write in his honor, one of the all-time great songs from the Civil War, “The Vacant Chair.” At the top of the cover page to the sheet music is an illustration of a family gathered around the table, but there's one high-backed chair that's empty. The dinner plate is placed for the young soldier, but there will forever be *The Vacant Chair*.



Over the years, I have encountered some incredible experiences when telling this story. One day, at Greenfield Village, I was quoting the words to the first stanza, “We shall meet, but we shall miss him. There will be one vacant chair. We shall linger to caress him, while we breathe our evening prayer.”

A young lady, perhaps 20, started to well up, warm, loving tears flowing down her cheeks. I stopped for a moment, thinking I had said something to offend her. “No sir, it's not you,” she whispered, as her family pushed in tightly around her, lending love and support. “My brother is in Iraq, and every night my mother sets a dinner plate for him at the table.”

Her words took my breath away, and I stood silent for a brief moment. Then I said, “This song is as relevant today as it was 148 years ago (Today, its 152 years ago). Every night, school children are coming home to a vacant chair. They will help prepare dinner. They will do their homework, and they will go to bed, knowing that the chair is vacant. In the morning, they'll dress for school, tie their shoes, grab their books, and go out the door, knowing that the vacant chair will be a painful reminder that their mother, father, brother, aunt, uncle, or other loved one, is at war, protecting this Nation, giving us the democracy we take for granted every day.”

I always conclude my programs with this song, and it's one of the major reasons why I continue to tell the stories behind the songs. I always encourage the audiences, “To shake hands with a Veteran; tell him or her you appreciate what they have done, or what they are doing, if they are on active duty. If you are unable to say the words, then just extend your hand to that person wearing the hat that says Veteran, or to the soldier in uniform. “They will know what your heart is speaking.”

On November 19, the 150th anniversary of President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, I told my audiences at the Harsens Island Historical Society, this story, including school children. At the conclusion of the first presentation, a wonderful, spry gentleman walking with the assistance of a cane, came forward and introduced himself to me. “I was touched by your telling of *The Vacant Chair*,” he said. “My name is Gary Grout; Lt. John William Grout is my 4th cousin.” He went on to tell the details behind Lt. Grout's death, and how he was often referred to as “Willie”, as the song says, “At our fireside, sad and lonely, often will the bosom swell, at remembrance of the story how our noble Willie fell.” Mr. Grout showed me the book he is putting together of his family's genealogy. Immediately, I turned to the pages featuring Lt. Grout.

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# Songs That Tell A Story *continued*

*as presented by Thomas Gordon*

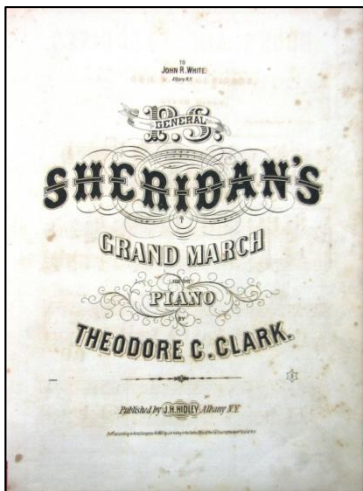
## The Vacant Chair

For the remainder of the shows we did that afternoon and evening, as I told the story of *The Vacant Chair*, I asked Mr. Grout to come forward while the song played on a CD. Handing him the microphone, Mr. Grout introduced himself. His talk was both mesmerizing and inspirational.

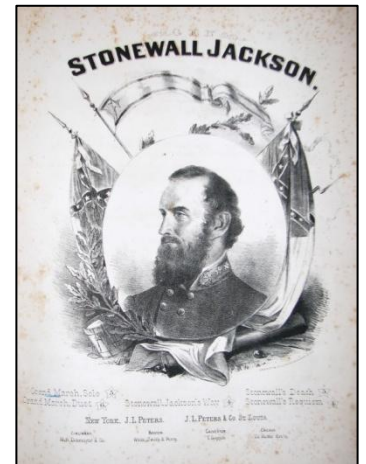
Over the years of telling *Songs That Tell A Story*, I have been impressed with those in the audiences, their reactions to the story, and their connections to our glorious American Heritage. Meeting Mr. Gary Grout will remain with me forever as one of the highlights of 30 years of telling these stories, of showing the original pieces of music that connects us to this living testimony of our rich American heritage. ■



Mr. Gary Grout



Mr. Thomas Gordon



## Ice Harvesting

excerpted from *Ice Harvesting in Early America* by Hill and Hughes

From 1800 to 1920, nearly every community of any size in the northeastern United States that was near fresh water harvested ice, usually during January and February, when temperatures were coldest. Because the season was short, work was intense; once the harvest was begun it rarely shut down until the entire crop was in the icehouse.

It would not have been too different on Harsens Island and the Flats around the late 1800s and early 1900s. All the major hotels and Tashmoo Park had icehouses before electricity came to the island. Businesses and residents alike would have had smaller versions of the icehouse or bought ice from the larger hotels.

Ice was used far and wide. In 1805, Frederic Tudor of Boston sent a shipment of ice to Martinique to help in the fight against a Yellow Fever epidemic. This appears to have been the first time that ice was exported from the United States. Ice was not always gratefully received, however. In 1830, the first shipment of ice sent to New Orleans so alarmed the bewildered Creole population that a riot ensued during which the entire cargo was thrown overboard. The ice burned their fingers.

As people began to want more for their tables than dried and salted meats, ice became an important commodity in this country. In 1830, businesses in Cincinnati were selling crushed ice by the basket. By about 1838, thanks to the introduction of ice cutters, ice was sold in square-cut blocks by weight. Over the years the demand for ice grew. Farmers used it to keep milk butter, eggs and perishable produce from spoiling; railroads used it to keep meat and milk from spoiling while being transported to market and to cool perishables served in their dining cars; hotels, restaurants and private homes used it in their iceboxes, ice cream makers and to cool beverages.

In the northern states, wherever there was fresh water there was money to be made. In fact, near the cities, farmers with ponds sometimes could sell the ice harvested for more than the value of the whole farm! In general, however, the cost to the typical homeowner was minimal. (Generally, 25 pounds delivered four times per week cost about \$2.00 a month.)

To meet the ever-increasing demand for ice, harvesting was done on ponds, rivers, bays and even canals. Methods and tools changed over time, of course. In the late 1700s, for example, men used axes to chop ice from ponds. The ax eventually gave way to the hand ice saw, which was later augmented by horse-drawn ice-cutting tools around 1825. The introduction of the steam engine ushered in a further advancement (1870) and then it was replaced by electricity-driven machinery (1912) since it took so long to get up steam in the mornings.

Sometime in January, usually, when the ice had reached the desirable thickness (ideally 14-16 inches – thick enough to support a team of horses), snow had to be cleared from the area to be harvested. If the snow was light and dry, a clearing scraper was used. This consisted of boards assembled in such a way as to provide a flat bottom and an angled back that slanted away from the bottom. It was usually about eight feet wide and was pulled by a horse. The operator stood on the tail board of the scraper so as to gather just enough snow so that it did not spill over the top of the plank. Heavier, wetter snow was removed by means of a scoop scraper which was only three feet wide and which was then followed by the clearing scraper. The snow was sometimes dumped on the edges of the ice field but since the weight of the piles occasionally broke the ice, it was safer to take the snow some distance away.



Scraping - courtesy of The Essex Institute

The next job was to mark the ice field. To create a base line men drove two stakes into auger holed about 200 feet apart at the edge of the field to be cut. They placed a long plank fitted with sights in line with the stakes and ran a hand plow close to its edge, cutting a groove one-half inch deep. When this line was completed, they scribed

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## Ice Harvesting *continued*

the first cross line in the same manner. These first grooves at right angles to each other served as guides for the ice marker, which had a row of teeth and a swing guide. The teeth were placed in the previously scribed groove and pulled along its entire length, deepening the groove to two inches. The swing guide was then placed in the groove, thus gauging the distance for the next groove, and the process was repeated until the entire field was marked out like a checkerboard.

Once the field was marked, it had to be plowed (or grooved) and this job was done by a horse-drawn ice plow. Each tooth of the plow was set to cut one-quarter inch deeper than the one in front of it; consequently, one trip with an eight-tooth plow would deepen a groove by two inches. Multiple trips by two plows could deepen the grooves to seven inches, sufficiently deep for 12-inch ice (the most common cut for retail trade). The cakes could then be split off with a breaking bar and, if done correctly, would break evenly, leaving no lips on the cakes.



*courtesy of The Detroit Publishing Co.*

The next step was to create floats. In the vernacular of an ice man, a float was a detachment of ice comprising a large number of cakes, with the cakes left together so they could be floated from the field to the channel where they could be separated. Floats ranged in size from four to eight cakes wide by 10 to 30 cakes in length. To create a float, men used handsaws, usually five feet long and with a handle like that on an old lawnmower. Following the grooves made by the ice plow, they sawed a strip across the end of the field to be harvested; this strip was just one cake wide and was sawed on both sides. A second strip was sawed at right angles to the first and the two strips were sunk underneath the side of the channel (care having been taken to saw the strips wider at the bottom than the top) in an operation called sinking the header. With two



*courtesy of The Detroit Publishing Co.*

sides of the first float thus freed, the men then sawed a third side. A good sawyer took a long stroke using nearly the full length of the saw and could cut an inch or more at each stroke. To free the fourth side they used a breaking bar (a tool with a wedge-shaped blade at the end of a handle) to split open the groove.

Now two or three men standing on the float itself used their breaking bars simultaneously and barred off strips of cakes, while others standing on the solid field of ice used pike poles or float hooks (an iron point and adjacent sharp hook on the end of a pole 12 to 16 feet long) to push the strips into the narrow channel and toward the barring bridge.

The barring bridge, located fairly close to the icehouse, was where “barmen” stood and jabbed breaking bars down into the ice strips with a twisting thrust to break off storage-sized cakes. As more floats were freed from the field and the channel became wider, the “barmen” worked on entire floats rather than cake-wide strips. On many a late afternoon numbed hands would lose their grip on the bar, sending it into the icy water to be retrieved by the ice harvester’s tool of necessity, the pike pole.

Getting the ice from river, pond or bay to the icehouse was not without its hazards. It was not uncommon, for example, for men to slip into the freezing water. Once pulled out, they were rushed to a shed where the warmth supplied by a pot-bellied stove, hot liquids and a change of clothes usually got their circulation going again so they were able to return to the ice field – no doubt exercising a greater degree of caution than previously!

Occasionally horses (often improperly shod) also got too close to the water or fell through the ice. For this reason, a “choke rope” was part of a horse’s standard equipment. This was a large rope with a slip

## Ice Harvesting *continued*

knot in one end that was hung around the horse's neck; the rest of the rope hung over the hames of the harness. When a horse fell in, all work stopped. The driver and his assistants immediately pulled on the "choke rope", shutting off the animal's wind supply and thus preventing it from struggling in the icy water. They were immediately blanketed and exercised and were usually none the worse for the ordeal.



*courtesy of Anderson University, Indiana*

Larger ice harvesting companies would have a conveyor system in place to move the ice from the river to the icehouse. In smaller operations, such as on Harsens Island and the Flats, a horse-drawn grapple hauled cakes out of the river and up an inclined plane made of planks.

Dampness was the greatest enemy of ice preservation, so icehouses were located in areas devoid of trees, where air circulated freely. Since the heat of the earth around and beneath it also caused melting, the ice had to be guarded by a nonconductor of heat on all sides as well as top and bottom. Consequently, there was usually a ten- inch layer of sand on the bottom of the icehouse and on top of that a layer of straw. Unless the icehouse was built over a cistern, the bottom also had to have a drain to carry off water. The floor, made of wood planks, was high enough above the ground to allow the air to circulate and slanted enough to drain off water.

Ideally, the icehouse had double walls, between which bark, charcoal, sawdust, hay, wood shavings, straw or some other nonconducting substance was put. When the ice was brought into the icehouse, a layer of sawdust was thrown between layers of cakes for insulation – and to make the cakes easier to separate later on. Sawdust was not really ideal, as it tended to clog drains, but it was cheaper and more accessible than the cleaner marsh grass. By the time the icehouse

was full, the harvest was surrounded by insulating material, sometimes as much as three feet of it.

Small icehouses were usually wood structures and the average farm family found 10 x 10 feet to be adequate. Larger icehouses (which were constructed of wood, brick or even hollow tile) were divided into rooms of perhaps 30 x 40 feet and 30 feet high, with each room holding 600 tons of ice.

Since some of the ice harvested would be used in beverages, precautions were taken to keep the ice sanitary. And, since horses are less than sanitary in their habits, someone had to clean up after them. This someone was called the "shine boy." His job was to scrape the ice at the scene of activity and pour formaldehyde on the spot to kill any germs or contamination that was left on the ice. He pulled a small wooden sleigh with a waterproof lining and collected what the horses had left; since droppings that were not picked up immediately left a noticeably shiny spot on the ice, this was called a "shine sleigh."

Another of the less-inviting jobs had to do with keeping the channel open. If temperatures were low enough to create ideal conditions for harvesting, they were also low enough to freeze any open water. Consequently, workers were hired (and paid more than the going rate) to keep the channel open at night – by keeping the ice floats constantly moving, rowing a boat back and forth in the channel or pulling an ice-breaking raft back and forth. This was bone-chilling work and sometimes (when the temperature plunged as low as 20 or 30 degrees below zero) wasted effort, as those whose job it was could see and hear fresh ice forming behind them!

Ice was a crop and like any other crop, subject to the whims of weather. A thaw or rain storm could ruin an ice crop. If the weather wasn't cold enough for long enough, ice did not get thick enough to harvest. In fact, many icemen considered they'd had a stood "run" if they had two good harvests in a row. ■



*courtesy of The Detroit Publishing Co.*

## Harsens Island St. Clair Flats Historical Society 2013 Calendar of Events

*subject to change*

Members are welcome to attend any Board / Membership Meeting to keep apprised of Society activities and to bring issues before the Board.

### Museum Hours

Dec - closed - open by appointment and for Christmas Sale (Dec)

### December

7<sup>th</sup> – Saturday

10 AM – 3 PM

**Cookie Walk** (Museum)

