



The Billerica Historical Society *presents*

Yankee Doodle Times

A Quarterly Publication of Historic News and Events

SPRING 2022

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



Spring 2022 President's Letter

The Billerica Historical Society is again holding Open Houses on the first Sunday each month. In April, we also held two Open Houses on weekdays for Billerica's seniors. The seniors met at the Council of Aging and walked over to the Clara Sexton House.



In April, Board member Tom Tringale gave a presentation at the Billerica Senior Center on Billerica's response to the alarm on April 19, 1775 when 100 Billerica Minuteman and Militia marched to Meriam's Corner in Concord and engaged British regulars. The talk was well received.

The Community Preservation Committee has approved our proposal for a grant for the restoration and winterization of the Barn. Town Meeting in May voted the final approval of the proposal. We will be starting the project this summer with the expected completion this fall. The first step will be to clean out the barn and put artifacts into

storage. BHS vice-president, Dick Hawes will oversee this project.

The BHS has received the first \$25,000 of the \$50,000 State grant that Representative Marc Lombardo obtained for us. Once the Barn is restored, we will use these funds to convert the Barn interior into a display area. We will receive the final \$25,000 once we complete this display area project. We are looking forward to a 2023 date for a grand opening of the Barn museum. 2023 is also the 300th anniversary of the Clara Sexton House.



On Billerica Clean up/Green-up day, April 23, BHS members spent a few hours cleaning up BHS property at the Middlesex Canal Shawsheen River Aqueduct on Route 129 at the Billerica/Wilmington line.

Maintaining the Clara Sexton House consumes most of our recurring funds. I want to thank again all of you who continue to make generous contributions to the Society. We put these funds to good use.



Regards

John Bartlett

The Story of Simon Purcheas
by
Alec Ingraham

Rev. Samuel Whiting (1633-1712/13) graduated from Harvard College in 1653 and five years "he came to Billerica, to fill a large and honorable place in the history of the town." Chosen by the Town Meeting to be Billerica's initial pastor, Whiting assumed the responsibility of establishing Billerica's First Parish Church. In this capacity he received adequate support and compensation from his parishioners. Remember the relationship between the Town and the Church in 1658 was far different from what it is today. The location of his homestead is marked by a plaque affixed to a boulder at the intersection of Concord Road and Charnstaffe Lane. The Reverend gained respect



and served the church and the town for over a half century.¹

Main Garrison Marker 1900 at Concord Road and Charnstaffe Lane
Courtesy Billerica Public Library

Whiting possessed beliefs that were broadminded for his time. The records of the Town Meeting held on October 30, 1693 provide insight into his character. "At this meeting our Reverend Pastor, Mr.

Samuel Whiting, did set at liberty and free from



Samuel Whiting

his service, Simon Negro (Purcheas) who hath been his servant about thirty and one years, being now about forty years old. This which said Simon Negro the Town of Billerica doth accept as an inhabitant amongst themselves."² From the tenor of the wording, it becomes clear how black people were regarded at the time. Some basic arithmetic suggests that Simon began his service to Whiting in 1662 when he was but nine years old.

Although a freeman, Simon's obligations to Rev. Whiting did not significantly change. He continued in his service. In 1709, when Simon was 56 years of age, he received from the Reverend a grant of 17 acres of land in Billerica west of the Concord River. It appears from the accounting of his estate in 1714 that he had experienced a measure of success working his farm as a freeman independent of Whiting. His estate was valued at nearly 90 pounds (about \$332,400⁶ today) before his debts were paid. Simon owned a 45-acre homestead including an orchard and grasslands. Along with the usual household goods and farm implements, he owned an 18-acre parcel on the Concord River, 2 bullocks, 2 cows, and a sheep.

On May 15, 1712 he married Rose Hill, a black woman, in Boston. The Boston Births, Marriages and Death records the event thusly "May 15, 1712 Simon Purchas Negro and Rose Hill Negro by the Honorable Samuel Sewall, J.P." Unfortunately, a year later, at the age of 60, on May 27th, Simon Purcheas was "kilde with the Litning" in Petocket³ (land north of the Merrimack River possibly Dracut). His estate was probated by the Court. Isaac Stearns, a successful Billerica businessman, assisted Rose with the task, however, Rose was not pleased with the manner in which the estate was settled and protested. She believed strongly that the Court had not taken into consideration the expense of her own funds that she had employed to settle Simon's debts. Rose also complained that Oliver Whiting, the Reverend's son, had led away two bullocks and two cows from Simon's homestead without authorization, among other claims.⁴

In Massachusetts in the early 1700's Rose's status as a woman, let alone a black woman, possibly influenced the Probate Court's decisions which favored the Whiting heirs' claim to Simon's legacy. Legally, in the present, it would seem Rose's claim on Simon's estate would have been adjudicated in a more equitable manner. She

moved on though. On January 8, 1717 she remarried, in Boston, Mingo Caesar, a black man. According to one record of their union. Mingo was “*the late servant of Mary Winthrop*” and Rose Hill Purchas [Purcheas] was “*of Brooklyn*” [probably Brookline].

Simon Purcheas had great respect for Reverend Samuel Whiting, Jr. A deed recorded both at Northern Middlesex County Registry of Deeds in Lowell and at the Southern Middlesex County Registry of Deeds in Cambridge lends credence to this fact. Excerpt from the deed *Simon Negro to Mr. Whiting’s Children etc.* which was recorded in Charlestown by Samuel Phipps, Registrar on June 13, 1712 follow. “*For and in consideration of the Respect I have and Do bear to my Master’s family And for other good considerations there unto moving me...confirm unto my Masters Children, that is to Samuel Whiting of Dunstable now in captivity. To Oliver Whiting of Billerica, Elizabeth Clarke of Chelmsford, and Dorothy Whiting of Billerica all my estate in Billerica both personal and Reall. That is my Homestead and house lott situate in Billerica according to the butts and bounds of the same in Billerica Town Book of Records. Also my division of Land on the West of the Concord River, with all the building Fences and trees thereon standing or being together with all the personall Estate ... in case I should Die without any heires Lawfully begotten of my body to Have and to Hold the said given premisses To be Equally divided among them.* Simon continues. By giving twenty shillings (about \$208⁶ today) apiece to three of Reverend Whiting’s grandchildren: Joseph, son of Samuel Whiting, Samuel, son of Oliver Whiting, and Timothy, son of Elizabeth Clarke.⁴ Although it may seem Rose was treated unfairly, a careful reading of the deed along with a consideration of dates of Simon’s marriage and the recording of the deed, give pause to consider the Whiting’s Children’s claim.

It is not obvious from the records how Reverend Samuel Whiting, Jr. obtained possession of Simon. Who were his parents? Where was he born? What was his lineage? Why did he choose the surname Purcheas [Purchas, Purchey, the official record offer many and varied spellings]? Is this lack of information due to the lapse of over three centuries or due to Simon’s race? It is difficult to speculate. You be the judge. One fact is certain Simon Purcheas was the first black man to legitimately hold land in Billerica.

1. The Reverend Henry A. Hazen, A.M.: Member

of the New England Historic and Genealogical Society,
History of Billerica, Massachusetts with A Genealogical Register, Boston: A. Williams and Company, 1883. Page #155 Genealogical Register
2. The Reverend Henry A. Hazen, A.M.: Member of the New England Historic and Genealogical Society,
History of Billerica, Massachusetts with A Genealogical Register, Boston: A. Williams and Company, 1883 Pages #170-171.
3. Vital Records of Billerica, Massachusetts to the Year 1850, Boston: New England Genealogical Society at the Charge of the Eddy Town-Record Fund, 1908. Page #384.
4. Middlesex County Wills and Probate, *Simon Purchas*, #18625.
5. Northern Middlesex County Registry of Deeds, Billerica Book #1: Page 509, June 12, 1712
6. Measuringworth.com.



Vintage Tea Fundraiser

Grab your hat and gloves and join us for tea on Saturday, May 21 at 3 PM at the Bennett Library.

The cost is \$15 for adults and \$10 for children 12 and under.

To purchase tickets mail your check to:
Billerica Historical Society
PO Box 381
Billerica, MA 01821

2022 Membership Drive

It is time to renew your membership in the historical society if you haven’t already:
Senior is \$15
Individual is \$20
Family is \$30



Membership payment can be sent to:
Billerica Historical Society
PO Box 381
Billerica, MA 01821

We encourage you to invite a friend to join the society.

**Clara E. Sexton Memorial
House Museum,
circa 1723
Headquarters of the
Billerica Historical Society**

36 Concord Road
Billerica, MA 01821

(978)667-7020
Billericahistory.org



BHS Officers and Board 2021-2022

Officers:

President	John Bartlett
Vice President	Richard Hawes
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Directors:

Cathy Burns	Alec Ingraham
Mary Jones	Richard Kunicki
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Follow us on Facebook:
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Ways to Support the BHS

Due to COVID-19, many of you will be doing your shopping online with Amazon. If you use smile.amazon.com instead, you can designate the Billerica Historical Society as your charity of choice. (Smile.amazon.com IS Amazon.) Place your order as you always would but a portion of your purchase will go to the BHS every time you make a purchase. The BHS has received \$166.19 as of November 2021, from purchases made by folks like you.



Upcoming Events

May 21: Victorian Tea Fundraiser, from 3-5 PM
at the Bennett Library

Monthly Open Houses:

First Sunday of the month, 1-3 PM

Be Watching for:

Historical Lectures at COA

Book & Gifts:

Hazen's History of Billerica

\$55.00

Sexton House Cookbook

\$3.00

Commemorative Spode Plate

\$10.00

SALE PRICE



Billerica Historical Society
PO Box 381
Billerica, MA 01821