

SUMMER 2023

## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



The Billerica Historical Society has continued to have a busy schedule. We had a successful Vintage Tea in May at the old Bennet Library. Diane Douglas coordinated this sold-out event which netted about \$1,300 for the society. There was a special open house around Patriots' Day with the Billerica Colonial Minute

Men on duty.

Other than installing a heating /AC unit in the Sexton House barn attic, the barn project has been completed. Dick Hawes oversaw the entire project which came in on budget. That project was funded by a Billerica Community Preservation grant. Several display cabinets were ordered for the barn and we are now putting many of our artifacts in them. Those cabinets were paid for by a state grant obtained for the Society by Representative, Marc Lombardo. That grant also paid for new computers, a printer, a projector, 2 portable tents, and tables and chairs for the barn.

We have had an Open House on the first Sunday of every month and will continue to have them through October.

We had another successful restaurant fundraiser at the Casa Blanca Restaurant. Michele DeParasis has been coordinating these fundraisers and this one raised \$350. We will be having more of these restaurant fundraisers in the Fall.

We will continue to be busy in the future. On Saturday, August 5, the Sexton House will be part of the History Comes Alive Tour. On Sunday, August 6, we will have an extensive quilt display at our open house. On Monday, August 14, we will have a booth at the Billerica Farmers Market at the old Ditson School site. On Saturday, September 23, we will have a booth at Yankee Doodle.

And on Sunday, September 24, we will have a celebration of the 300th anniversary of the Clara Sexton House along with the official grand opening of the barn museum. Cathy Burns is coordinating the day's events, including talks about the 300 year history of the Sexton House and the transformation of the barn into a museum.

We expect that in late August the two front concrete walkways will be replaced with pavers using Community grant funds. Also in late August, the Town will install a sign that we had made using a Community fund grant describing the development of Garden City in North Billerica. Garden City was one of the first planned housing developments in America. The sign will be on Letchworth Ave. Rich Kunicki designed the sign and is coordinating the installation.

We are having the Annual Meeting on Saturday, October 28 from 1 to 5 PM at the Bennett Library. It will be 100 years since the society's time capsule was sealed. We will open it at the meeting and expect to find many letters, photos, and society and Town of Billerica documents. We will then place current documents in the time capsule and reseal it. Save the date and plan to attend.

At all of our events, we will be selling BHS t-shirts with the front having the society's insignia with Billerica's founding family names and the back has the names of the 113 Billerica Minutemen who went to fight the British at Merriam's Corner in Concord on April 19, 1775. Contact us if you would like to purchase one.

We have been using grant money for capital purchases and improvements, but the operating costs for the Sexton House are paid with other funds, including your generous contributions. Your contributions are still very much needed.

Regards, John Bartlett

**Billerica Recollections** *The following excerpts are taken from recollections of growing up in North Billerica, written by Matthew Harvey Kohlrausch, who was born 1859. Some of the photos came from the Kohlrausch collection.*



Matthew Kohlrausch on the bank of the Concord River

At the Talbot Mills there was one lock of which the gate hangers and stone casing can be seen from the sidewalk near the mill gate. When the old Logwood Dye Mill was constructed in the yard a dam was put in to keep water up to the pond level. This made a storage basin in the canal which is now mostly filled in.

In the edge of the river bank back of the old dry shed east of the road is a large rock with two rings in it to which the logs of the floating bridge were attached. On the easterly side of the river about fifteen feet from the end of the point are two bulk heads filled with stones where was the section of the bridge that could be floated back when it was necessary to float logs or boats through. This floating bridge was the canal towpath across the pond.



Tow Path and Floating Bridge, by Jabez Ward Barton

On the Faulkner Mills side of the dam is a bulk head in which there was about forty years ago a fishway as required by the state. We boys, when there was no one looking, would pull up the gate at the head, let the water run for a while, then close it down and we could usually find several fish in the fishway pockets.

Once Tom Harrigan fell off the end of the weir in a spring freshet and was carried under the bridge but he was a good swimmer and got out alright.

Another time Lorn Stewart asked Jerry Mahoney to help him set his muskrat traps which he had in a boat in the pond. Jerry supposed he would draw the boat around the

dam, but instead Lorn rowed fast for the falls. They got over right side up but were shipwrecked by a big roller wave just below the bridge. They found the water so full of air bubbles here as to make swimming difficult, but they got out and later fished out the traps.

Below the wool shop was a foot bridge over the canal with a dam under it where there is now a frame of timber against recent addition to the old wall. This was put in place by the Talbots to hold the water at the right level, they built up the towpath also. This was after the locks above had been abandoned. In this basin, boats were floated in from the pond and stored. To go swimming, we boys passed by the old Mixer Farmhouse through the old orchard, then over the above foot bridge and down the towpath to the Big Swimming Hole. A shortcut was over the little water course in the canal bed by stepping stones that were placed by old Mr. Crowley who had used such in his old home in Ireland. This was where a drain pipe now crosses the canal. The shortcut was through The Little Woods of Birch, Aide, and some Pine, a reserve for birds and squirrels that extended to the Red Locks, and seemed quite extensive to us boys. Most of these are gone and the surface has been filled with rubbish to a depth of six to eight feet. In this dump was at one time a lot of old tar roofing that we boys set afire. The fire got in so deep that it couldn't be put out so the village had to stand a tar smoke smudge for many days.



Faulkner Mill

The Red or Guard Locks were to let boats and logs into the river for Wamesit. There were two sets of gates the upstream gate of the outer set I remember standing with the long arm by which it was opened hanging over the river. The downstream gate was laying in the bank outside. The lock basin was lined with plank on post of which stubs are now left. These planks were far enough from the wall to permit a small boy to climb behind them. The wall was level with the top of the bank but many of the top stones have been removed for buildings. It was a great place to catch kiwerr (small panfish) in this basin and we threw them back of us into a pool in the bottom of the old quarry from which the lock wall stone was taken and where a willow is now growing.

An old sand boat was used to repair the dam. It was a flat bottom scow nearly as wide as the canal and about twenty feet long with ends sloping up to a sharp square edge, and with its bottom sheathed inside against the knees, with a

hole in the center to dip water from. It is said that one is now loaded with stone on the pond bottom. The sand was taken from the sandy land near Talbot Dye Works and probably stone from the quarry on the island. The boat had whole pins at the ends for the skulling and steering wares and at the sides for rowing. In addition to the oars, a pole with iron point and hook at right angles from it was used to push or pull the boat where oars could not be used. We boys liked to ride on the boat. Old Dan Murphy who had charge of it would let us ride on the pond to and from the double rings in the rocks at the canal opening would then call out "go ashore boys" and we had to go.

Bart (Bartholomew) Harrigan, father of Tom Harrigan, was, I believe, the last lock tenant. He lived across the pond at the gate tender's house then standing opposite the Rogers' house, and would run across the point and floating bridge to the locks when the boatmen blew their horn.

At one time, there were many suckers in the old canal. The fishermen would sink a weighted net at the Red Lock and then beat the water with poles from upstream to drive the suckers down to the net. Sometimes a busher would be drawn at a haul.

There were horned suckers who mated and spawned in pair and big suckers who mated and spawned in a bunch of many crowded together. Hornpouts would discharge a round mass of gelatinous spawn about four inches in diameter over which the mate would discharge the fertilizing fluid for a long time alone. The mother horn pouts would keep her little ones about her as a hen does her chicken for quite a while. My office was in the northwest corner of the mill near the water where I would watch the big rock in the river. Here musk rats would often come to eat the soft roots they would get from the river bottom. Here, too, I once saw a big snapping turtle catch a dove that was drinking, and pull him underwater.



Falls at Faulkner Mill

Below the Red Locks now lays a decayed trunk onshore that I remember as a fine oak with a decayed spot on the side long used as a target. On the other side of the river opposite Indian Rock is another down trunk which was a landmark called the Big Pine with a scraggly oak like top. The big oaks now standing on this broad meadow looked no bigger now than they did when I was a boy. There is a road near shore that is crossed by the brook that heads in

the meadow north of Gilson Hill. It is an interesting fact that north Billerica is made an island when meadow and brooks are full by another brook that runs east of the river across the Treble Cove Road. The broad meadow in high water is covered enough for boating and skating and across it on the edge of low lying upland is the split rock with two parts that once fitted but are now pushed apart about three feet. This is, and long has been, a favorite boys resort and fire-place, just as the old quarries are on "The Island" between the cove and the river above the mill dam where boys made camps now are as they were in my boyhood days. This island with its big pines and other trees was a place of great natural beauty when I was a boy as it is now.

Another place that we boys occasionally ventured near and then hurried back on the run was the meadow back of Mr. Delehanty's on the canal toe path road. Here it is said that an herb doctor by the name of Hemmenway when digging herbs was so angered by one Lynch that he stabbed and killed him with his herb knife. Near here, too, was the horse burying ground before the South Lowell Rendering Works were established.

The Big Swimming Hole was between the Talbot Dye House and the site of the Guard Locks also called the Red Locks because painted red, and opposite the diving rock. Here the musk rat had dug through the canal bank and caused a wash out that had spread a gradually sloping body of sand into the river. This had deep holes on either side of the shore, in the upper one of which a man named Crowley was drowned. The sand ran to a rock that was parallel with the shore about twenty-five feet from it three feet wide twelve feet long with a top about three to four feet below the surface. About fifty feet out into the riverbed was the diving rock with a perpendicular face underwater dropping down to a sandy bottom about nine feet deep. This stone in ordinary stages of the water had a top upon which five or six boys could stand and an overhanging edge on the canal side with a shelf under it upon which boys could get a foothold. It was not unusual to see a dozen boys in the water or waiting on the rock for their turn to dive off. A good swim was up to the big rock back of the mill and the long swim was down to the Indian Rock from which the boys would run back along the shore. The shore opposite the swimming hole was at that time lined with trees.

In the canal close by was the little swimming hole for the little boys where the water was not over their heads and a little below this the girls' swimming hole. Another swimming hole was in the canal in front of the Talbot Mills just east of the road. At noon, the men would throw in coppers for the boys to dive for. They would usually get them before they hit the bottom as it was hard to find them in the mud. There was a bridge running across the canal diagonally from which the boys dove and the more daring ones dove from the top of a little projection to the dry shed which was here. Some also dove from the bridge over the road. This being too public a place, swimming was finally prohibited.

The new found out swimming place was in the canal bed to the east of the river about four hundred feet from the new Rogers' house.

Mill waste and dyes have ruined the old swimming holes below the dam. The canal is out of use and either drained or stagnant so the boys now swim above the dam and below the Fordway bridge on the east side of the river.

*(Editor's note: I especially enjoy hearing stories about the past in Billerica. It makes history come to life. I have other stories I hope to share with you in the future.)*

**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 2022-2023**

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**Upcoming Events**

**August 6:** Quilts on display at open house, 1-4 PM

**August 14:** BHS booth at Farmers Market

**September 3:** Open house, 1-3 PM

**September 23:** BHS booth at Yankee Doodle

**September 24:** 300th Celebration of the Sexton House and dedication of barn museum displays

**October 1:** Open House, 1-3 PM

**October 28:** Annual Meeting, opening of the time capsule, 1-5 PM

**Billerica Minute Man T-shirts**

The historical society is currently selling T-shirts with the BHS logo on the front and the list of the minutemen who marched to Merriam's Corner on April 19, 1775 on the back.

Sizes include:

Men's - Medium, Large, XL - \$20  
XXL, and XXXL - \$25

Women's V-neck - Medium, Large - \$25

To order, send request, size, number of shirts, cost of shirts plus \$5 for shipping to:

Billerica Historical Society

PO Box 381

Billerica, MA 01821



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