



BENNINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER, JANUARY 2024 Issue

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

ROBERT EBERT

I am excited to rejoin the Bennington Historical Society after a hiatus of several years. Upon my return, I find a group as dedicated as ever to the preservation and presentation of Bennington's rich history, with the strong support of, and solid collaboration with, your Bennington Museum.

Our monthly presentations are as varied and informative as ever, and the many projects and programs we're undertaking -- such as the publication of new books (look for our upcoming book on the 250th commemoration of the Battle of Bennington), the reprinting of historical documents and publications, the four-year book-of-the-month reading program we recently launched, and the highly regarded newsletter you are reading now -- all serve to keep Bennington's history fresh in our minds and as vital as today's news.

Add to those the newly rejuvenated Regional History Room, stocked with a wealth of historical information and staffed by BHS volunteers who are ready (as well as willing and able) to help you in your pursuit of local and regional history.

Perhaps the most exciting find upon my return to the Bennington Historical Society is a robust attitude of inclusion. BHS is dedicated to providing us with new ways to look at and think about our history and to raise the forgotten voices of our past. It is the past which provides us with a road map to the future.

So, come to Bennington Museum often, to enjoy the monthly BHS presentations, to peruse the publications available in the gift shop, to explore the resources of the Regional History Room, and to wonder at, and learn from, all of the exhibits and programs throughout the museum. It is time well spent.

PLANNING THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY

RAY RODRIGUES

The 250th is Coming - presented on November 19, 2023

Jonah Spivak, Phil Holland, Don Miller, and Jim Thatch briefed the Historical Society on the planning currently in progress for commemorations of the 250th anniversary of the Battle of Bennington, and asked members for their suggestions. To view their presentation, go to: vimeo.com/892464806

Phil summarized the many events and ceremonies related to the Battle of Bennington that have been held throughout the years:

PLANNING THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY CONT.

RAY RODRIGUES

- 1778 - The oration by Noah Smith
- 1789 - The first reenactment
- 1809 - General Stark's letter in which he ends with "Live Free or Die."
- 1841 - A Temperance Society meeting at the Battle site
- 1877 - The Centennial Arch erected in Bennington, with ceremonies lasting a week
- 1891 - The Battle Monument dedicated and a centennial arch erected
- 1911 - An historical pageant
- 1927 - The sesquicentennial celebration, including a two-hour parade
- 1976 - A week-long battle celebration, with 10,000 people attending a Willow Park event

Jim invited all to visit the Bennington 250th Committee website: bennington250.org
In addition, a book about the battle will be published by Bennington Museum.

A Battle of Bennington for the 250th - presented on December 17, 2023

The umbrella theme for the American and Vermont 250th commemorations for the period 2025-2027 is inclusion, especially the inclusion of the stories and voices of individuals and groups who have been omitted from, marginalized or misrepresented in past commemorations. Phil Holland returned in December, along with Katie Brownell, to share some of the lesser-known stories of the Battle of Bennington. The recording of that presentation will be available on the Historical Society's page on the Bennington Museum website soon.

The BHS will take a brief hiatus from programming during the months of January and February. Join us again starting in March. Programs take place on the 3rd Sunday of each month and are free and open to the public, thanks to funding from NEXUS Consulting.

Our first program for the new year will take place on March 17 when we will welcome Mercedes de Guardiola speaking about *Vermont for the Vermonters: The History of Eugenics in the Green Mountain State*.

THE BENEFACTIONS OF TRENOR PARK'S DAUGHTERS

TYLER RESCH

Trenor W. Park (1823-1882) was an aggressive, possibly cutthroat 19th-century businessman who made two benefactions that became important institutions for his hometown of Bennington. In 1865, the same year Park built his elegant Second Empire mansion, he and prominent dry-goods merchant Seth B. Hunt (1811-1880) joined together to give the town its first public library and reading room.

Later, after the deaths of both Park in 1882 and Hunt in 1880, funds they provided were used to convert Hunt's summer home to start the Vermont Soldiers' Home for Destitute Children and Women, i.e. the orphans and widows of Civil War casualties. It gradually evolved and expanded into today's Vermont Veterans Home.

Park's daughters, known familiarly as Lizzie and Lila, also left important community assets, but in these cases the beneficiaries are mostly residents and students in the village of North Bennington. Lizzie gave a public library and Lila gave land for a college campus, a mansion, and a municipal water system.

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THE BENEFACTIONS OF TRENOR PARK'S DAUGHTERS CONT.

TYLER RESCH

Lizzie was Eliza Hall Park (1848-1938), named for her aunt, who was Congressman Hiland Hall's young hostess while he was in Washington (she died at the age of 22). Lizzie was born in California while her father was managing John C. Fremont's Mariposa gold mines. She married John G. McCullough (1835-1915), a railroad president and founder of First National Bank of North Bennington. Also active in state and national politics, McCullough had been an early attorney general of California and later, in 1898, served in the Vermont legislature. In 1902 he was elected governor of Vermont.



After his death, Lizzie honored her husband's memory by providing the funds that built the John G. McCullough Free Library, which opened in 1921. It was located on a prime corner of North Bennington Village, on the site of the one-time four-story Boot & Shoe Company, which had burned. This library today actively serves Bennington as well as Shaftsbury, which has no public library.

Lila was Laura Hall Park (1858-1939), ten years younger than Lizzie, and named for her mother. She married Frederic Beach Jennings (1853-1920), one of seven sons of Rev. Isaac Jennings, the influential pastor who led the First Congregational Church of Old Bennington for 34 years.

F.B. Jennings was a lawyer, banker, and businessman with an office in New York City, and served as counsel to several major railroads. In the first years of the 20th century, he built his grand residence in North Bennington; a long, imposing gray stone mansion that faces down a broad gentle hill, accompanied by a large carriage barn.

In 1930, during the depths of the Great Depression, when the committee that was straining to create Bennington College was in an especially dire financial period, Lila, now widowed, donated 140 acres of her land for the college campus. In 1939, seven years after the college was established, the estate's long driveway and the Jennings mansion itself were added to the campus, and "Jennings" became the college music building. Sadly, this was also the year Lila died. But the Jennings property was better than the campus site that was originally proposed, 45 acres at the head of Bennington's Elm Street. It had been offered by James C. Colgate, then withdrawn, because of the strain of the Depression.

In more recent times, some college students have come to believe that the old Jennings homestead is haunted, and it may have been the inspiration for Shirley Jackson's book, *The Haunting of Hill House*, a story adapted to film several times, most recently as a Netflix series.

Lila also donated to the village the North Bennington Water Department, in 1920, in memory of her husband. The fresh Green Mountain water comes from Glazenbury, several miles away, and the system included two reservoirs, miles of underground pipes, and a memorial water fountain in the village park.

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THE BENEFACCTIONS OF TRENOR PARK'S DAUGHTERS CONT.

TYLER RESCH

Trenor Park himself plays a role in this story, though he died fifty years before Bennington College opened. He had purchased the property that would become the campus from Hiram Bingham. The closeup map of North Bennington in the 1869 F. W. Beers Atlas of Bennington County shows today's campus acreage as "Bingham Hill" and also identifies the residence of T.W. Park. For each of his daughters as a wedding present, Park had given half of that property.

BENNINGTON'S OTHER MONUMENTS: FIRST SCHOOLHOUSE MARKER

BILL MORGAN

A small, rough granite rock rests near the more substantial William Lloyd Garrison Monument on the traffic island south of the Old First Church. An equally small bronze tablet is fastened to the otherwise commonplace stone, and on it are inscribed the words: "Near this spot stood the first school house built in Bennington, August, 1763. This Boulder [sic] was placed here on August 16, 1927 by the children of all the schools in the town of Bennington."



Early in January, 1763, the newly-arrived residents of Bennington sent a petition to the courts in New Hampshire asking for permission to build a meeting house, a school, mills, roads, and a bridge.

Permission must have been granted because on May 9, 1763, the town voted "to raise six dollars on each right of land in Bennington for building a meeting house and a school house". The story that has been passed down states that in August, 1763, work began on a log structure which was completed in only five days, indicating it must have been a rather plain building.

Two months later, a stone fireplace was added, in anticipation of colder weather. At first, there were no desks or benches, and students had to sit on fifteen-inch-high log stumps. No books were available, so by necessity, the lessons were mostly oral, and the pupils used paper brought in from New Jersey to do their homework.

The early settlers' idea of a public school was not what we would think today. Education was not mandatory, and usually not free. The school admitted mostly boys and a series of private schoolmasters came and went, serving for short periods of time. The only student for whom we have a record from that first term in Bennington is a 10-year-old boy by the name of David Robinson; no listing of the other students has survived.

The first teacher to accept a teaching position in Bennington was a Miss Harvey, from Deerfield, Massachusetts. She was contracted at a rate of six shillings a week, but decided not to come at the last minute, citing the dangerous journey she would have to make through a forest teeming with wolves and bears. The town fathers tried to get a replacement teacher from nearby Albany, but had no luck and so the parson of the new church, Jedediah Dewey, volunteered to teach the first class, even though he had little formal education himself.

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BENNINGTON'S OTHER MONUMENTS: FIRST SCHOOLHOUSE MARKER CONT.

BILL MORGAN

Once the building was finished, records show that on Oct. 4, 1763, official ceremonies were conducted to open the school. During his inaugural address, Deacon Stephen Story quoted lines from Shakespeare's Richard II.

*Of comfort, no man speak:
Let's talk of graves, and worms and epitaphs;
Make dust our paper and with rainy eyes
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.*

Rev. Dewey admired those lines so much that he often quoted them and asked that the quotation be used as an epitaph on his own tombstone, which now stands in the cemetery beside the church.

Jedediah Dewey's connection with the school is largely dependent upon the memory of John Leland (1754-1841), a well-known Baptist minister from Cheshire, Massachusetts. In 1808 he mentioned Dewey's teaching during a revival meeting in Pownal, but little other documentation remains. What is known is that in 1775 the classes were moved to the second floor over the porch of the Old Meeting House. It is believed that the original log school was broken up a few years later and used for firewood by students at the newly-built school, Clio Hall.

In 1927, in conjunction with the sesquicentennial celebrations for the Battle of Bennington, this small marker was unveiled. At 10:30am, on Monday, August 15th, twelve hundred children gathered at the Graded School on School Street and those students, along with a number of dignitaries, parade floats, and brass bands, marched in procession up to the site where the marker was to be dedicated.

They were led by Breard H. Hawks, who dressed as George Washington and carried the flag while riding his favorite horse, Brownie. William H. Wills acted as the parade's grand marshal. A group of children, all wearing navy blue shirts and dresses, marched in a formation meant to resemble the Vermont state flag and all the children were given red, white, and blue ribbons to commemorate the occasion.

One amusing float that drew the attention of the audience featured the figure of Molly Stark sitting on a four-poster bed preceded by a group of British Redcoats. On the float was a sign, "Molly Stark does not sleep a widow", a reference to General Stark's famous remark before the battle.

Vermont's governor, James C. Colgate, rode along the parade route in a private car before presenting the keynote address. Songs, prayers, and speeches were given, and tribute was paid to the early school by all the children who had raised money for the monument themselves.

Although it sits in proximity, this first school shouldn't be confused with Clio Hall, which was built on the corner where the Old First Church now stands. That academy was privately funded and incorporated by the trustees on Nov. 3, 1780. After a shaky financial existence, Clio Hall was destroyed by fire in 1803, thus providing the foundation stones for the church.

THE COLGATES, THE JEROMES, AND BEN VENUE

ANNE BUGBEE

In the past, the Bennington Historical Society met quarterly at the Bennington Free Library to hear fellow members present their research papers. One of those papers was presented by the late Joe Parks, then a librarian at Bennington Museum. Enhancing his lecture were photos from the many picture albums that Bennington's Jerome family made available to him.

Parks' lecture touched upon the local family's relationships with a variety of prominent people, including Winston Churchill. Churchill's mother was Jennie Jerome of Virginia, whose family summered in Williamstown, Massachusetts. A product of the Gilded Age, Jennie married the Duke of Marlborough, thus gaining a title, and granting the duke access to much-needed money.

Lawrence Jerome was the ancestral head of the Bennington Jeromes. His youngest son William became a prosecutor in New York City, gaining fame by prosecuting the high-profile Harry Thaw-Evelyn Nesbit-Stanford White murder trial (the subject of the bestselling book, *The Girl on the Velvet Swing*, and once called "the trial of the century".)

Both the Colgates and Jeromes were from families of great wealth based in New York City, and it was marriage that caused both to come to Bennington. James C. Colgate married a local woman, Hope Hubbell Conkling, in 1890, and in 1917 James Travers Jerome Jr. married Colgate's daughter, Hope Hubbell Colgate. In their earlier years, both were part of the non-resident summer colony in Bennington Center, as Old Bennington was called until 1907. Eventually both families became residents.

Bennington could boast of many mansions in the 1900s -- those of Putnam, Hunt, and Scott families to name a few -- but only two that displayed the grandest manifestations of American wealth. The most ostentatious one was Edward Hamlin Everett's "Orchards" on the east slopes of Mt. Anthony (now owned by Southwestern Medical Center, and rumored to become an exclusive five-star resort). The humbler one was James C. Colgate's "Ben Venue" located on the north slopes. Everett loved competition and was always challenging J.C., but Colgate never rose to the bait. The Colgate family began building their fortune by selling candles and soon went into other businesses. J.C. Colgate's father founded a Wall Street brokerage firm while his brother became the owner of the Colgate pharmaceutical firm.

The Jeromes were so-called "new money." They descended from brothers from upstate New York who moved into Wall Street and became financiers. James Colgate's mansion was built on the ruins of his "summer cottage," the property of his mother-in-law, Ada Conkling Tibbetts. The home burned in 1899, and Colgate rebuilt it for her. As soon as he married Hope Hubbell Conkling, he started to buy local property. The first was a large farm abutting his mother-in-law's land, where President Millard Fillmore lived as a boy. Colgate bought many parcels of adjoining property to enlarge it. When his mother-in-law died, her property became his. Eventually Colgate turned Fillmore Farm, which had been run as a successful commercial enterprise, over to his dozens of employees.

After spending a large part of his life on Wall Street, William Jerome Jr. decided to leave the city and call Bennington his home. His wife's father gave him the old David Robinson house where he practiced law, became State's Attorney, and later served as civil defense leader during World War II. He also organized the search for the missing Bennington College student, Paula Weldon.

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THE COLGATES, THE JEROMES, AND BEN VENUE CONT.

ANNE BUGBEE

The depression left J.C. Colgate less wealthy but not headed to the poorhouse. He died early in World War II. His widow lived another dozen years, but when she was gone and unable to sell the mansion, it was destroyed. Some of the stones are part of the south wing of the Bennington Museum.



A FASCINATING WEBSITE: LITTLE BROWN JUGS

RICHARD CASWELL

We recommend Little Brown Jugs littlebrownjugs.com for the way it focuses deeply on a single topic; Norton Potters' small, often specifically designed, jugs. The site includes many photos of old pottery, jugs commemorating special events, and even an ochre mine that has since vanished. The photos of potters' tools, like stamps, grinding wheels, and jug stackers, adds a depth to the site that helps all of us understand more about the processes used.



Greg Santise, the creator of the website, said, "I started collecting little brown jugs over 40 years ago. My family used to visit Bennington and the surrounding areas for vacation. Later my wife and I started collecting Norton Stoneware and LBJs. Being young and poor, we focused on LBJs."

BHS KICKS OFF READING PROGRAM

DON MILLER

The Bennington Historical Society Reading Program tracks the evolution of the American Dream as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of our nation and state; it kicks off January 1st, and follows a book-of-the-month format. The first volume highlighted is *Seeds of Discontent: The Deep Roots of the American Revolution, 1650-1750* by J. Revell Carr.

For most of us, the period between 1620 and 1770 is somewhat of a mystery. How did we get from Plymouth Rock in 1620 to the Boston Massacre in 1760? In *Seeds of Discontent*, J. Revell Carr argues that in the restive English colonies, those seeds were sown from 1650 to 1750, taking root in the early 1760 before Vermont was settled by pioneers from New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.

The colonists of Massachusetts and Connecticut did not come to America in revolt against England. When they declared Independence in 1776, only a minority of Americans were ready to leave the Crown. Rather, the early settlers left England in pursuit of religious freedom, either outside the Church of England (Pilgrims) or within it (Puritans). They were granted royal charters that codified the terms by which they were to govern themselves as colonies.

BHS KICKS OFF READING PROGRAM CONT.

DON MILLER

At the same time, the Crown awarded licenses to various groups of adventurers and speculators seeking wealth in the colonies. Their success brought them extraordinary autonomy and liberties inconceivable back in England. The Crown benefited from a “hands-off” approach to colonization.

Carr describes this relationship as one of “benign neglect.” Largely left to set up their own government, the colonies struggled on their own; making new lives unaided in remote, often inhospitable conditions, fostered a strong sense of independence in these hardy immigrants. And eventually Britain’s neglect, benign or otherwise, compelled their distant subjects to a new mindset altogether: “[T]he cumulative effect of more than a hundred years of British disrespect, mismanagement, and exploitation prepared the minds of the colonists for revolution.”

To read more about this book, visit benningtonmuseum.org/seeds-of-discontent/

ABOUT THE BHS

The Bennington Historical Society is volunteer-operated program of Bennington Museum based in the Regional History Room. Meetings take place on the first Monday of every month from 4:15 to 5:15pm, but we encourage you to stop by the Regional History Room during our open hours to say hello and talk about projects that you might like to be involved in.

The Regional History Room is open Monday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday afternoons, 1-4pm (by appointment when the Museum is closed January-March: library@benningtonmuseum.org).

OFFICERS AND MEMBERS

Robert Ebert, President 2023–2025

James Thatch, President Elect 2022–2023

Bill Morgan, Secretary 2022–2024

Don Miller 2023–2025

Jackie Marro 2022–2024

Ray Rodrigues 2021–2023

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Rick Caswell 2023–2025

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Emeritus Members: Charles Dewey, Bev Petrelis

BHS programming is made possible in-part thanks to support from:



Make a gift to the BHS today to help keep our programming and newsletters free and frequent this coming year!

75 Main Street, Bennington, VT 05201

benningtonmuseum.org