



Dennis Historical Society

Newsletter

April 2024

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The next Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday, April 9th, 2:00 pm at the Josiah Dennis Manse Museum

61 Whig Street, Dennis Village

Members Welcome

Please send information & stories for the newsletter to Dave Talbott at the DHS Website email address: info@dennishistoricalsociety.org

What better way to introduce the start of the annual *renew your membership campaign* in the Dennis Historical Society than to begin the April Newsletter with another article contributed by longtime society member Jack Sheedy. I am pleased to announce that since the last time Jack contributed an article to our newsletter, DHS has added quite a number of new members. For them, here is a quick recap of his credentials - author/co-author of eight books, including *Dennis Journal* and *Cape Cod Collected*, Jack has written hundreds of newspaper articles about Cape Cod history. He has appeared on HGTV and NPR radio, speaking on the subject of local history and folklore, and once again, his work is appearing in our newsletter...we are indeed fortunate!

Cemetery Stories

Every cemetery has its stories, chiseled in stone and weathered by the centuries.

Dennis has a number of sprawling cemeteries and a smattering of smaller burial grounds scattered throughout the town. We pass many of these final resting places during our daily travels within the five villages. One such place is Swan Lake Cemetery in Dennis Port, overlooking the tranquil waters of Swan Pond. The landscape of this burial ground rises and falls like the crest and trough of a gentle wave, which seems appropriate given that the river from the adjacent pond leads southward to Nantucket Sound. And it is further appropriate because some of those remembered or interred here were either lost at sea upon an ocean voyage or had drowned in local waters.

This cemetery's story began more than a century and a half ago. The December 8, 1865 Yarmouth Register announced, "The people of Dennis Port have also been laying out a cemetery on the road leading from near the residence of J. K. Baker, Jr., to the Railroad Depot. It contains five acres of land which, together with fencing, and general improvements, will cost \$2,000. (It) is to be called, Swan Lake Cemetery." Earlier in the article it was mentioned that the village of Dennis Port had also recently built a schoolhouse and a hall "just within the limits of Harwich" as a "joint product of the people of Dennis Port and West Harwich."

Improvements to the cemetery were made over the years, including the addition of a granite and iron fence according to the October 28, 1882 Register. And in 1925, as published in the July 30th Hyannis Patriot, "... an archway of Quincy granite has been erected to the entrance of Swan Lake Cemetery. It is inscribed 'Swan Lake Cemetery,' with the year 1925 on the keystone".



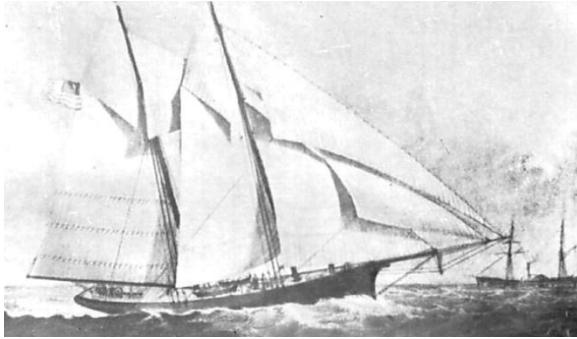
Entrance to Swan Lake Cemetery from the DHS Website



The gray and white gravestones contained within thoughtfully identify those resting beneath, with names and dates and epitaphs of many who lived and died long ago. Medal of Honor recipient Benjamin Franklin Baker, a veteran of the Spanish-American War, rests here.

Image of marker from the DHS Digital Archive

Unfortunately, an identity of the deceased was not always known. For instance, the following appeared in the September 17, 1887 Register: "Medical Examiner Munsell of Harwich, held an inquest, and gave a verdict of accidental drowning, on the body of an unknown man that was washed ashore near the mouth of Bass River on Thursday of last week. There being no means of identification, the body was taken to Swan Lake cemetery, for interment."



Schooner and steamer, courtesy of Google steamer."

Similarly, the June 19, 1877 Barnstable Patriot included this brief news story: "A body supposed to be that of the captain of the schooner Mary Etta Tilden {sic}, sunk by a collision near Cross Rip last month, came ashore at Dennis Port last Thursday morning.— The selectmen took charge of it and had it buried at Swan Lake Cemetery." Articles in the Register and Patriot, from May of that year, reported on the collision between the Marietta Tilton and the steamer Harrisburg in Nantucket Sound. According to the May 26, 1877 Yarmouth Register, "The schooner sunk in a few minutes. The captain and his wife, the mate, cook, and two seamen were drowned. Two seamen were saved, and landed at Vineyard Haven by the

Sadly, sea tragedies were a part of life in those olden times. And in some of those cases, victims found eternal rest within the hallowed ground of a Dennis cemetery. A fabulous footnote – Jack Sheedy will be the guest speaker at our Annual Meeting/Luncheon in October! **Thank you Jack!**

A Special Request

At the end of January, I received an email from DHS board member and chair of the West Dennis Graded School Committee Pat Corcoran with a request that I include the following in an upcoming newsletter - "The West Dennis Graded School Town Committee is interested in receiving stories on how the West Dennis Graded School also known as the Dennis Community Building was used. I emailed back saying that I would be pleased to do so, and asked Pat if she would send me an example of the type of stories that she was looking for. Pat quickly obliged with this recollection by Eleanor West Koehler. Eleanor is a docent at the DHS Maritime Museum; born in Dennis Port and a graduate of DY High School. She lives in Georgia, but summers here. A first cousin of Burt Derick, their mothers were siblings.

In the early to mid 1950s, the West Dennis Graded School held square dances for teens on Friday nights. It was called the Chowder Club, and the dances were "called" by Gus Walsh and Quincy Newcomb. It cost 25 cents to get in! Girls wore dresses or skirts with lots of petticoats that poofed out when they twirled around. Refreshments were served on Halloween and Christmas. The upstairs was off limits as the floor was not safe.

Square dancing became obsolete with the birth of rock and roll. This ushered in the years of Teen Town dances at the WDGS with a 50 cent admission fee. We danced to the music of Elvis, the Everly Brothers, the Big Bopper, the Platters and many other famous rock and roll musicians.

These dances were so much fun! We became friends with many summer teens who attended these dances.

Thank you Pat & Eleanor



West Dennis Graded School, late 1800s, DHS Digital Archive

The only survivor of what once was five Graded Schools built in Dennis between 1859 and 1867, (see the September 2021 DHS Newsletter). The WDGS underwent a significant renovation which was completed in 2000, (see the September 2001 DHS Newsletter). When that work was finished, the building was put on the *National Register of Historic Places* that August, and in 2001, the State of Massachusetts Historical Commission awarded the WDGS its preservation award.

Twenty-four years later, this historic Dennis building is in need of work again. As part of a coordinated effort between the Town of Dennis, the West Dennis Graded School Committee, the Dennis Historical Commission and the Dennis Historical Society, efforts have begun to once again preserve this historic structure. Part of the effort of your Society is the creation of a living record of the memories of those who recall their experiences with the WDGS. As Pat concluded her email above - *If you have a story to contribute, you can email it to pcorcoran19@comcast.net. We have already received some wonderful stories. Thank you!*

I have always been fascinated by diaries. My father kept one, my maternal grandfather kept one, and many Cape Codders kept/keep one. There are many common threads and themes, one of which was the weather. Recently, DHS board member and past president (twice) Betsy Harrison passed a CD on to me destined for the DHS *Pauline Wixon Derick Library*. Amongst many things on the CD is a portion of a diary which was transcribed by the late, great Burt Derick. After another amazingly mild and almost snow free winter on Cape Cod, I thought it would be interesting to look back to the winter of 1912 in East Dennis using excerpts from the diary of Mary "Minnie" (Homer) Sears recorded that January. Although there is an entry for every day, I have omitted all except the snow days to reflect the contrast with our recent winter!

The Diary of Mary "Minnie" (Homer) Sears

MONDAY, JANUARY 1, 1912

A lovely day after the storm of yesterday -- Wrote Xmas letters this morning and sewing on Catharine's night gowns this afternoon -- Mrs. A. S. Chase called -- Wrote Marga this evening -- Memorial Hall Com. made arrangements for Lecture course -- Annual Meeting at the Church this p.m.-- A beautiful moonlight evening—



DHS Digital Archive. Yes, that is a horse drawn sleigh up the road.

Write Hattie & Joe this forenoon. Letter from Mr. Barnard at noon. No mail tonight.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 6, 1912

Still very cold. Ther. down to °10 this morning. Sewing on and finish Catharine's night dresses today. Elsie making cake & cookies. Received Calendar from Mr. Barnard this noon. Dancing school and Assembly this evening.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 9, 1912

Snowing last night and clearing today. Still very cold. Dr. Hart called.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 12, 1912

Snowing and still Cold. J. H. Farnsworth passed away last night – age 67.

MONDAY, JANUARY 15, 1912

Stormy and cold, no wash. The first entertainment in the Memorial Course this evening by the Wilbur Starr Concert Co. Every one pronounced it fine. Henry and I could not attend on account of colds.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 16, 1912

Still stormy and cold.

MONDAY, JANUARY 29, 1912

A snow storm – cannot wash. Finish my dressing sack.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 30, 1912

Still unpleasant and no washing done. Our water pipes are out of order in some way – no water in the house. Bring it all from the barn. The trouble is between the barn and garage.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 31, 1912

Snowing again today but not very cold.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 1912

January has passed – a very Stormy month. Reading and sewing – making three kitchen aprons. A lovely day overhead, but slippery walking. Called on Ma this forenoon. Loulie Kelley and Ralph both call on business. Elsie commenced table runner for Ladies Aid.

Thank you Minnie and thank you again Burt!

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HISTORY OF QUIVET NECK

Sears Families, Saltworks, & Sea Captains



**Researched and Presented by
Dennis Historical Society's Mary Kuhrtz**

SATURDAY, MAY 4, 2PM AT JACOB SEARS LIBRARY
A \$5.00 donation is suggested.

It's Membership Renewal Time!

Don't just renew your membership; give a membership to a family member, or friend.

What a great gift!

Not only will that membership be appreciated, it will help us grow!

Please include a note with the name and mailing address of the gift recipient along with your payment.

You can do so online using **PayPal** at
**[http://www.dennishistoricalsociety.org/
Get Involved/Membership](http://www.dennishistoricalsociety.org/GetInvolved/Membership)**

After making your payment, email us at
info@dennishistoricalsociety.org
to send the name and mailing address of the lucky recipient.

Thank you!