



Dennis Historical Society

Newsletter

February 2024

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**The next Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday, February 13th, 2:00 pm at the Dennis Memorial Library
1020 Old Bass River Road, Dennis Village**

Members Welcome

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

Bet You Didn't Know!

Unless you have a copy of the *Gazetteer of Dennis*, you probably are not aware of the interesting facts, history and some of the amazing characters about and from the town many of us call home. Compiled by the *Dennis Historical Commission* over numerous years before being published by the *Dennis Historical Society* in 2013, the *Gazetteer of Dennis* was edited by the late, great, local historian Burt Derick. It is with pleasure that I pass some excerpts from the book on to you!

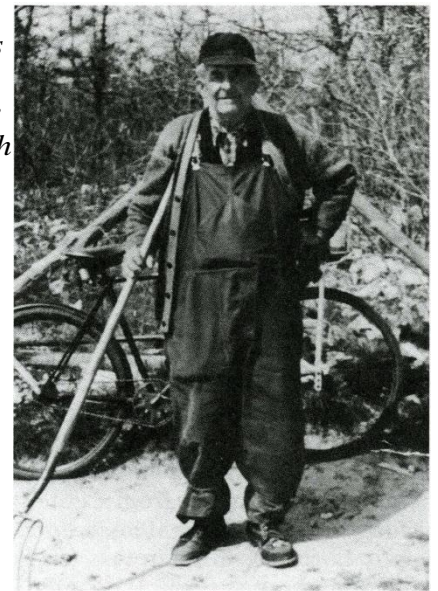
Theophilus F. Smith Road

This is the road from Route 134 to the Dennis Transfer Station. [Transfer station is the politically correct name for the town dump - and was always called thus by the locals. Some of us still slip into the old terminology.] The road is named for Theophilus Smith (1875-1964), who was the long-time "Keeper of the Town Dump" when it was located off Route 134, just north of the Old Police Station at the corner of Bob Crowell Road.

Theoff Smith was truly one of the grand characters of the past century in Dennis. He resided in the old house at the corner of Upper County Road and Main Street, South Dennis, and kept livestock there. He had dairy cows, and sold milk to the neighborhood. He had dozens of cats and they always got their drink first before the milk was directed into the bucket at milking time. Never owning an automobile, his transportation was a bicycle, which he could pedal so slowly as to carry on a conversation with even the slowest walkers along the roadway; people marveled that he never lost his balance on that bicycle.

Theoff had a tendency to "cuss" - with every sentence - and his language was most colorful, but he never did it to offend; it was just his way. He was always a gentle and moderate man in his habits and dealings with his neighbors.

After lunch, at the little shack at the dump, he would sit in the sun and oversee the folks that arrived with their trash. Occasionally, he would nod off in slumber. One story is told that a crew that had just cleared up old floral arrangements in one of our cemeteries came quietly into the dump and carefully arranged the old flowers around the dozing Theoff, who, when he awoke was greatly startled by the funerary display! "D-D-D-Damn it - I ain't dead yet!"



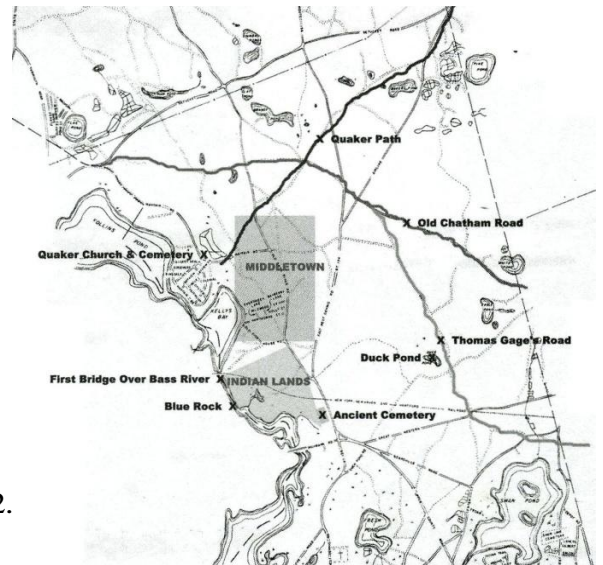
Theophilus F. Smith 1875 - 1964

Middletown

or Middle Village - an area of the town of Dennis, along Old Bass River Road, near half-way between the north and south sides. As the town developed, and as the power of the churches waned just after Revolutionary times, it became necessary to separate church and state, per the Constitution. Town meetings, instead of having to be held in the Churches (Meeting Houses) had to be held on neutral ground, and the Middletown area was selected to erect a town house. Also located here were the Alms House and the town farm. The families living in the area were at first the Kelleys.

By 1920, nearly all buildings were gone from the area, and it had returned to the wilderness. See Map 5. One of our local postmasters, Charles Marshall Underwood (1837 – 1915) of South Dennis was a writer and poet. He often wrote of the local characters and doings, and wrote two out-standing diaries of his life aboard ship when sailing before the mast as a young man. One of his creations was a poem concerning a town meeting held in the old town house that was at Middle Village.

Ed. note - As in the Norman Rockwell painting with a similar name, Underwood captures the feeling and spirit of the *Town Meeting* in his poem *The Dennis Town Meeting* written in 1905. The poem is too long to include in this newsletter, but for those who have attended our town meetings in the past, I urge you to obtain a copy of the *Gazetteer of Dennis* and read APPENDIX 2. It is available in our website Bookstore. You will see how much things have remained the same!



MAP 5 – The Middletown section.



A view of the town house and the men gathered around the lunch wagon during a break in the affairs of state. In those times, town meeting was held early in March, and was attended exclusively by men, as women's suffrage had not been enacted.



Another view of the town house during lunch break. The lunch wagon in later years was operated by Alton Robbins of Dennis Port, and there was always reputed to be a jug in the bushes to keep the chill off.

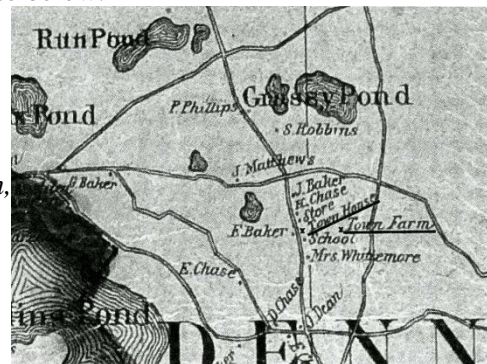
The Alms House

The Town of Dennis Alms House was one of the structures in *Middletown* or *Middle Village*. It was near both the old Town House and the Town Farm shown on the map and referred to below.

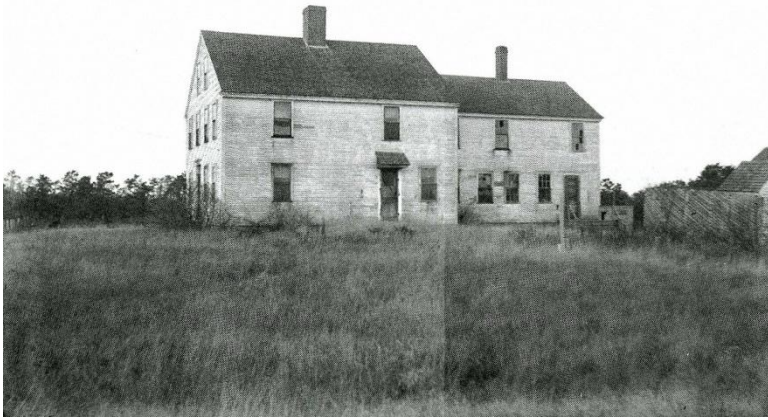
- located two miles from the railroad station at (the present) Asack Drive & Old Bass River Road, the Alms House was used to house and care for needy people of Dennis from 1837 to 1927.

The Alms House was operated by the Overseers of the Poor (the Board of Selectmen), who hired a keeper, usually a family in town, who lived there at the Alms House itself. It had 11 bedrooms with straw and featherbed mattresses on the second floor, no bathing facilities and a first floor kitchen that also served as the dining room. The front room was used by Dennis selectmen for business and the town records were kept there.

In 1887, Barzillai Chase was superintendent and was paid an annual salary of \$225. By 1898 that salary had increased to \$300. The "inmates" were usually residents of the town who had no family of their own to care for them; and often consisted of young widows and children of lost seaman, as well as the old and infirm. Families were



A portion of the map of 1858 showing Middletown or Middle Village, where was located the "Town House" and the "Town Farm (Alms-house)."



expected to care for their own and so the population of the Almshouse was rarely more than a dozen people at any one time. The "inmates" were expected to work if they could, particularly tending the "town garden" which was nearby. The Alms House fell into disuse when County and State hospitals were built. It was sold at auction and dismantled in 1928.

The Dennis Alms House after it was abandoned, from an old glass plate negative from the Margaret Eastman Collection.

Except as noted, maps, photos and non-italicized text in this issue are from the Gazetteer of Dennis

Black Ball Hill

This road off of Route 6A in Dennis Village is the companion to Signal Hill Road. In the early days before telegraph and telephone there was a unique way of informing people on the south side of town when the Boston Packet ship at the north side was arriving or leaving. The arrival of the packet was announced by a flag flying from a pole at the highest point in that area. This signal was spotted from Judah Baker's windmill at the end of present day Pinefield Lane in South Dennis, and a flag was raised there to alert the south-siders. The day before the packet was to leave a black ball was raised to the top of the pole. This system allowed passengers, mail or freight to go to the packet for dispatch to Boston. Contrary to some popular opinion, until the advent of steamships, there were few regular packet services between Boston and points south of Cape Cod. Packets went from the north shore of the Cape to Boston, and from the south shore of the Cape to points south.

During the days of the underground railroad, slaves were brought north to the south shore of the Cape, primarily Bass River, and kept hidden in West Dennis until it was thought safe to transport them to the north shore, the next leg of their trip, where East Dennis was a haven. They then went north from the East Dennis area of the Cape to refuge in Canada, where, as soon as they were on Canadian soil, they were truly free, and the fugitive slave laws had no reach.

Ed. Note - Built in South Dennis in 1791, the mill was moved several times before ending up in its present location on Bass River in South Yarmouth,



*Judah Baker's Mill, S. Dennis before being moved to S. Yarmouth on Bass River
DHS Digital Archive*



*Former location of the Mill before the move.
Courtesy of Google Maps*

Dennis Historical Society
P.O. Box 607
South Dennis, MA 02660-0607

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2023
DHS Annual Appeal

There's still plenty of time. If you have not yet responded to your Society's 2023 Annual Appeal letter asking for support for *wish list* items for each of our three museums and library, do so now!

Please give generously! Your contribution will greatly assist our volunteers in fulfilling our Mission Statement:

**To Preserve, Protect & Promote the
the History of Dennis, Massachusetts**

*If you have already given
Thank you!*

Membership

It's a month away, but it's never too early to think about what your membership means to you, and what it means to your Society!

Next month is membership renewal month. When your renewal arrives, please respond quickly and mail a check in the enclosed envelope.

Or, you can renew online using

PayPal

<http://www.dennishistoricalsociety.org/>

**Click on the tab Get Involved,
then click on Become member**

Thank you!