



# Kent Historical Society Newsletter



Special Edition

Kent, Connecticut

December 2012



**Seven Hearths in 1919**

*Greetings from the Kent Historical Society!*

**We would like to introduce you to a real Kent treasure that is hidden in plain sight on Rte 7 in the Flanders Historic District just north of town.**

A slightly shabby looking large gray house, "Seven Hearths" goes unnoticed by the majority of drivers whipping around the sharp bend in the road right there. But those who do stop in are absolutely enchanted with what they find, and often ask, "Why have I never been

here before?" Good question! The answer most likely is that they've never heard of it, or didn't know enough about it to *want* to stop in. Legitimate answers, and they don't make us happy. So, the Kent Historical Society is on a mission to let the world know what a gem we have. We hope you will enjoy this special edition of our newsletter, made possible by a grant from The Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation. [More on that grant in a moment.](#)

Built in 1751-1754, and now on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Historic District, the house has a long and varied history, which is obvious to all who walk through the door. It is clearly very old, but just as clearly has a 20<sup>th</sup> century element that is alive and well. For most of the 1900s, Seven Hearths was owned by internationally known artist, George Laurence Nelson, who bought it in 1919, lovingly restored it, and gave it its name in honor of the seven fireplaces that served to heat the expansive structure. Nelson was so taken with the house, its life and spirit that he wrote a small book about it, documenting his discoveries, progress and thoughts. *New Life for Old Timber* has been invaluable to us as we move forward with our mission.

As Nelson discovered while researching the history of his new home, Seven Hearths was the epicenter of the colonial town of Kent. Built by the commercially-minded Beebe family in the 1750s, the large building housed not only their home, but also a general store, butcher shop and a fur trading post. Undoubtedly, friends gathered here on a daily basis to visit, swap stories, gossip and talk about events of the world. Under one great roof, then, was the equivalent of today's Town Hall, Community House, IGA, True Value and perhaps even the post office. So it's fair to say that this structure was Kent's main hub of the trade network so critical to colonial economy. Early Kent store ledgers in the KHS collection illustrate in detail the process of barter, trade, cash transactions, and the importance of the store and storekeeper for basic survival in early Kent. We have not yet been able to recognize a specific ledger as being associated with the Beebes' store, but the general picture given by the various ledgers confirms the enormous significance of this particular building in very early Kent life.

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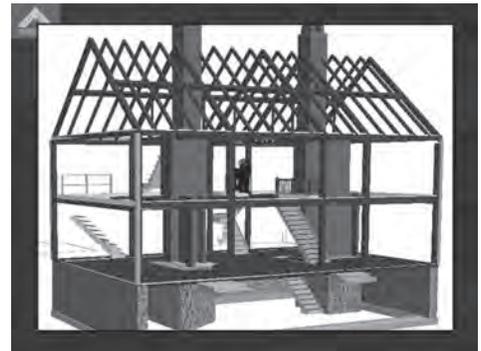


With the passage of time, the house progressed through various uses, including being divided into two apartments rented to tenant farmers in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As Seven Hearths aged, the town of Kent was evolving. A little over a century ago, the area was discovered by a group of New York City artists yearning for a pastoral escape. Laurence Nelson was one of them. Lured by the beauty of the Litchfield Hills, they established an art colony here that morphed into the Kent Art Association in the 1920s. Ever since then, Kent has been a mecca for painters and sculptors, poets and writers who all contribute to the atmosphere of arts and culture that makes Kent so famous today.

Laurence Nelson bequeathed his beloved Seven Hearths to the Kent Historical Society in 1979. Since that time, it has been open to the public on weekends in the summer. But that is not enough. In 2006 we completed a Long Range Strategic Plan. One main goal of that plan was to have Seven Hearths open all year round, in order to better share the story of this extraordinary building. To do that, we needed to learn more about the building ourselves – its physical condition, its complete historical record, and the stories about what went on under its huge roof over the last 250 years. We decided in 2009 to do an in-depth assessment of Seven Hearths, and applied to the CT Trust for an Historic Preservation Technical Assistance Grant (HPTAG) to fund an Historic Structures Report (HSR). The Trust’s Circuit Rider, Greg Farmer, guided us through the HPTAG application process. They generously awarded the full amount that we had requested, and have given enthusiastic support to Seven Hearths and the historical society ever since!

### THE HOUSE

The HSR was developed to have three main sections. The first is a thorough physical investigation of the condition of Seven Hearths conducted by Mason Lord of Hudson Valley Preservation Corporation (HVP) of Sherman, CT. HVP took an in-depth look at the house, investigating every nook and cranny and producing computer-generated drawings of the structure illustrating their findings in detail (see sample at right and on page 7). They used various tools and techniques, including a small boroscope camera to look behind walls and above ceilings. Relying on their extensive knowledge of historic structures, they were able to determine a great deal about the house. They created a report with a broad summary of its condition and specific prioritized recommendations for restoration and repair.



To quote from the HVP report, *“Seven Hearths is in good to excellent condition and the outbuildings are in fair to poor condition. The house has many slants, bows, sags and some twists. Despite these somewhat disconcerting elements the building is remarkably sound. The greatest need for the physical well-being of the house is a new roof... Some window sash and frames are in need of restoration, and plaster repairs in some rooms are required. The house is significant in its historical accuracy. Not much has changed from the original construction, and if changes have been made, restoration efforts generally have been accurately executed. An exception is the removal and replacement of the clapboard siding... The outbuildings have been preserved through benign neglect and the installation of new roof shingles. Thus the buildings are still standing (barely) but have lost some historic accuracy with the use of new architectural trim at the roof eaves and rakes.”* The report goes on to discuss in detail the

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deterioration of the load-bearing brick wall in the cellar of the house, the lack of proper insulation, and various other smaller issues. Recommendations for treatment of each aspect are included, for both Seven Hearths itself and the outbuildings, especially the 18th century privy. Using the findings of this report, we have begun the process of addressing the issues. The roof has been replaced and the outbuildings now have a secure new foundation. The list of recommended projects is long, and we will be working on it for the foreseeable future (and would welcome your help)!

Not all of the discoveries were routine by any stretch of the imagination, however. Based on a comment made by Nelson in *New Life*, we decided to look for the location of a colonial-era fur trading store on the 2nd floor. We found it! Carefully hidden by Nelson's 20th century dropped ceiling, the word "mink" is written with chalk on the original beams in the northwest corner. There are many other chalk marks, as well as very early hand-wrought nails with an "x" next to each, suggesting that a variety of pelts may have hung from those beams. We've removed the 20th century ceiling, and though we're not quite sure how we will proceed with this area, it will definitely be redesigned to suggest a Fur Trading Post of yesteryear. To our knowledge, there is no such place anywhere else in New England, except for one in northern Maine! We also were able to discern the location of some original doors that have been removed over the years in various places in the house. Perhaps they will be restored at some future time.



### THE GROUNDS



For the second part of the HSR, an archeological reconnaissance of the property was conducted by Dr. Gregory Walwer and Stephen Bartkus of the Guilford firm Archaeological Consulting Services (ACS). ACS dug test holes in a 25' interval grid, and found many small treasures, including cream ware, pearl ware and red ware ceramics, kaolin pipe fragments, buttons, buckles, window and bottle glass, and various bits of animal bone. These last discoveries disclosed the original use of an area we have long referred to as "Nelson's Sunken Garden". It was the

foundation of the barn most likely used as the farm's slaughterhouse! Dr. Walwer turned these finds over to Dr. Nicholas Bellantoni of the CT State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), with the recommendation that SHPO guide us in future archaeological investigation, perhaps with the assistance of students from Western CT State University. Dr. Bellantoni agreed, particularly in terms of helping to document the rather hazy 19th century period of tenant farmer occupation. He subsequently made two visits to Seven Hearths during the investigation, once to get a general idea of the property and then to help us excavate the hole beneath the three-seat 18th century outhouse! Dr. Bellantoni is now also a huge fan of Seven Hearths.

### THE HISTORY

Meanwhile, we were hard at work on the third component - gathering all the history of Seven Hearths that we could find. This took us in many different directions. We examined all available Beebe documents, including the 1813 death inventory of Daniel Beebe, Jr, one of the last members of that family to live in the house. It contains a variety of items including woolen stockings, a feather bed, 14 cider barrels, a bayonet, sets of china, pewter and pottery dishes, cows, sheep, tools etc. What a great illustration of the needs of an early American family! We searched for people who have first hand knowledge of the house's history. For example, we are now in contact with the children of two farm families who rented the house around the turn of the last century - the Parsons and the Segers.



We videotaped Lewis and Albert Parsons' niece, 94 year old Ester Pollard of Sharon, as she sat in what had been the kitchen of her grandparents' house in the 1880s. She recalled that both of her uncles had been born in Seven Hearths. Edith Gregory Seger is at the center of this photograph at left. Her daughter, Helen, was born in the house in 1904, and her granddaughters and great-granddaughter still live locally and have been to Seven Hearths. Their recollections are opening the door to our research into the "tenant farmhouse" era of the house. It is a story of great interest, and one about which we have much yet to learn!

Other interviews include people who either worked for Mr. Nelson or had their portraits painted by him in the house. In addition, his granddaughter Bonnie Hinkle lives in New Jersey and is a wealth of information about the house in the mid twentieth century. The most extraordinary discovery happened by sheer coincidence. In February, 2011, we received an email from a man in Ohio named Gregory Sent, who was looking for the ear marks for cattle recorded in the town records by his ancestor John Beebe. He wondered if we had any information about John Beebe, or if we knew anything about any Beebe houses. We sure did! That began a long correspondence that culminated in Greg visiting Seven Hearths in August of that year. Here he is, looking at the mantle of the great fireplace in the kitchen, no doubt thinking about the many meals his ancestors might have prepared right there so long ago. Greg has since given us a tremendous amount of information about the Beebe family, including the astonishing fact that John Beebe Sr's great-grandfather came to this country as an indentured servant. To have come in servitude and poverty to the new world, and in only a few generations to have amassed the wealth to build a house of the magnitude and stature of Seven Hearths is remarkable. This truly makes the story of the Beebes and Seven Hearths the quintessential American Dream!



## OUR PROGRESS



The old roof in 2009

Armed with the findings and recommendations from HVP's structural report, we are moving ahead with some of the projects. The top priority was the replacement of the badly deteriorated asphalt roof. But the choice of material for the new roof was not easy. Seven Hearths is the flagship of the Flanders Historic District, and the KHS board has long felt that the asphalt roof is completely inappropriate from an historic perspective. We initially investigated cedar shakes as the obviously appropriate replacement roof material, but then learned that the quality of modern cedar shakes is substantially inferior to that of the

18<sup>th</sup> century. Plus, a cedar roof would need regular cleaning and maintenance—something that we are not well equipped to do. So, board members visited several 18th- century houses in Madison, CT, that are roofed with a recycled rubber/wood product called *Enviroshake*. They look like aged cedar shakes and will last a great deal longer than cedar or asphalt, with no maintenance. Although the upfront cost is considerably higher than asphalt, and more than cedar, there will be good savings in the long run. In addition, the new appearance of Seven Hearths sets a higher standard for the rest of the houses in the Historic District, all of which are privately owned. There is a constant physical, financial and moral challenge to keep Seven Hearths in appropriate historical condition, and we are committed to doing so in the best way possible. So, in November of 2011, HVP installed *Enviroshakes* on the house, and the response to its new appearance has been highly positive. Thanks in part to generous donations

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by our members, we got the job done in plenty of time to sail confidently through the winds and rain of Hurricane Sandy! Take a look next time you go by...

After some discussion, it was agreed that the next target should be the rapidly deteriorating outbuildings just behind Seven Hearths. They sit in the lowest spot on the property and are regularly surrounded by water pouring down Studio Hill Rd. The delicate 18th century three-seater outhouse was the most concerning, but we decided to address the whole complex of garage, sheds and privy at the same time. In the photo to the right, Mr. Nelson's 2-bay garage is closest to the house and the privy is the small structure at the far right. Two small storage sheds hang in between. HVP designed a foundation system that would raise the entire complex up out of the mud and tie it together for stability. The first step was to very carefully brace the tiny privy and move it well out of the way of all the construction activity. Once that was done, the rest of the buildings were jacked up and footings were poured for a new foundation. Silvano Boscardin, of Marco Boscardin and Son, completed the delicate operation without mishap, and found some treasures for us in the process! When holes were dug for the cribbing that held up the structures, lots of bits and pieces of china, glass and bone were found, suggesting that Nelson might have built his garage over the site of a second privy (which he had mentioned at in



*New Life*). Since the foundation project took many days to complete, we all had fun stopping by to poke through the piles of excavated dirt to see what could be found. KHS board members Jeffrey Morgan and Roger Gonzales are well-versed in colonial furnishings and easily recognized tiny bits of pottery and glass in our growing collection. We even have been able to match a few small pieces of blue and white china to the 1813 inventory of the possessions of Daniel Beebe, Jr.! To us history nuts, this sort of thing is incredibly exciting!

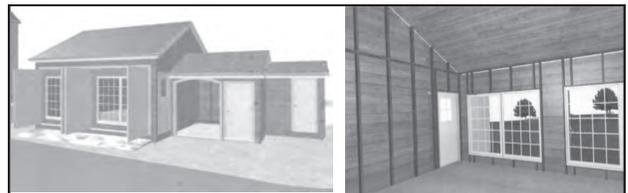
## OUR PLANS

With the outbuilding complex at the center of our attention, we decided that this might be the best time to take a *huge* step forward with one of the other goals of our Strategic Plan - the restoration of Laurence Nelson's reputation in the art world. There are many facets to this effort, but one of the ideas we had tossed around was the conversion of his garage into a small art studio that could be used for our summer children's art camp and by any other artists or art groups in the area who would like a lovely quiet place to sit and paint. We've had brief but positive discussions with some of our local artist friends about this in recent years, including Al Coffill, the art teacher at Kent Center School, and are confident that it will see regular use. While it won't be winterized, it will be made comfortable for the three warmer seasons. The existing outward-swinging wooden doors on the front will be carefully rebuilt, and backed by a system of screening and plastic sheeting that can be pulled down to keep out bugs and chill. There will be electricity, but no running water. The interior will be whitewashed, and a plain cement floor will allow for the inadvertent (or perhaps intentional) spilling of paint by enthusiastic young artists! If you have any thoughts about this project, we'd love to hear from you.



Left: Dr. Bellantoni explaining some of our findings to a rapt CT Trust audience.

Right: Two HVP renditions of what the future studio and privy complex might look like.



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## OUR GRATITUDE

This enormous undertaking - which is still a work in progress, by the way - would not have been possible without the participation of many wonderful people. First and foremost is *The CT Trust for Historic Preservation*, especially **Greg Farmer** and **Jane Montanaro**, without whom we probably wouldn't even have tried to do this invaluable Historic Structures Report! Their support and continued enthusiasm have been so encouraging. **Mason Lord**, **Dave Seegers** and **Dorothy Langley** of *Hudson Valley Preservation* have done an outstanding job of peeling back the layers of this ancient structure and explaining it all to us in laymen's terms so that we can make wise decisions about how best to take care of "the old gal" as they have affectionately dubbed the house.

CT State Archaeologist **Dr. Nicholas Bellantoni** now looks for any excuse he can find to come over to Kent for a visit with us. His passion for history is without limit. **Dr. Greg Walwer** and **Stephen Bartkus** of *Archaeological Consulting Services* gave us a tantalizing glimpse into what we could find to help us document the everyday lives of former Seven Hearths residents. KHS board member and restoration specialist **Jeffrey Morgan**, who is probably more familiar with the house than anyone else, was on site every step of the way, guiding the process and providing unique insight into its layers of paint and sequence of construction. **Pasquale Strocchia** did the energy audit.

**Silvano Boscardin** took extreme care as he raised and lowered our precious privy, and was clearly delighted to help rescue tiny pieces of glass and pottery while moving massive amounts of dirt from underneath the outbuildings. Our generous neighbor **Bill Gawel** of *Gawel Excavating* also carefully helped with the moving of the privy and has been available whenever we have need for a large machine and a skilled operator. **Frank Galterio** of *Galterio Design* videotaped the entire project and has created a delightful 30 minute film with highlights of many of the events and findings. That film is on DVD and is available at the KHS office. To all of these people, and to everyone else who has pitched in with advice, ideas and cash donations, we say - from the bottom of our hearts -

**THANK YOU!**

And finally: If you would like to learn more about Seven Hearths (take a tour, maybe?) and the KHS, please visit our website at [www.kenthistoricalsociety.org](http://www.kenthistoricalsociety.org). We also have a fun Facebook page with lots of our old photographs. If you like what you see, please support the Kent Historical Society. There is a membership form on the back page of this newsletter.

*Help us "Go Green" and save your money. May we send your newsletter via email? It will save trees and money - your money - which we'd rather spend in a wiser way. Please email us at [kenthistorical@att.net](mailto:kenthistorical@att.net) with "newsletter" in the subject line.*

### **A few more photos of the project and our findings, for your enjoyment!**



Jeff Morgan's  
paint analysis



Installation of the  
Enviroshake roof



More HVP rendered drawings





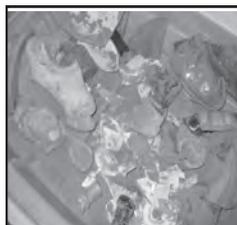
Mason Lord using the boroscope to find the word "mink" on a beam!



Energy audit in 7H by Pasquale Strocchia, filmed by Frank Galterio



Two paintings by George Laurence Nelson



Some of our tidbits and treasures from the garage excavation, including a piece of a 18th century Jackfield tea pot with a picture of what it would have looked like.

## Kent Historical Society

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or by appointment

This newsletter was designed by Lynne Hicks,  
and is compiled by Marge Smith

## Kent Quiz

**What is the barter system, and why was it important?**

**Answer to the last quiz:**

At the old Husking Bees at the Kent Community House, the baked beans were baked outdoors in a pit that was dug into the small hillside right behind the Congregational Church. If you know just where to look, the spot is still visible.

## Kent Historical Society

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*Here's a little extra for the Seven Hearths roof* \_\_\_\_\_

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