



Kent Historical Society Newsletter

A Stunning Surprise in the Schoolhouse Roof

by Marge Smith

The project of replacing the mossy old roof on our Skiff Mountain schoolhouse is finally done. It has been a challenge, to say the least. Through Preservation Connecticut, we applied for a grant from the 1772 Foundation in December, and received word in early spring that they would fund the new roof. That was great news. Then the trouble began! We wanted to use red cedar shakes, which are stronger and last longer. But when we started looking at prices, we discovered that due to inflation and the recent supply-chain issues red cedar was prohibitively expensive. Yet finding white shakes was not easy. It turned out that people across the country who had canceled travel plans because of the pandemic were spending their money on home improvement instead. That just worsened the supply-chain issue. But our intrepid carpenter, Mark Peterson, persisted week after frustrating week until he finally found some that could be shipped from Tennessee. It also was very expensive, but we decided to go with it, and Mark got busy stripping off the old shakes. Just in time, as it turned out!



As you can see in the photo to the right, the old shakes on the back side of the schoolhouse were falling apart underneath the moss and lichens. One more winter of ice and snow might have resulted in disastrous leaks. It was with a great deal of relief and satisfaction that we watched the new roof take shape as Mark worked his way up the slope. But then trouble struck again when he opened a bundle that he had hauled up the ladder. In the middle of the bundle were a number of shakes that were split or had knotholes. He tossed them down to the ground and hauled up another (heavy) bundle. The same thing happened again. Clearly, we had a problem. Logan and Mark pushed the supplier to ship us some replacement bundles ASAP, and he got back to work. Some of those new bundles also had faulty shakes in the middle, but there were just enough good ones to finish the job. It was a huge relief, and the new roof is beautiful! We are looking forward to welcoming the Kent Center School students back up there next spring, if possible. It has been a favorite field trip for the Third Grade for many years.

So, what was the stunning surprise? You'll have to turn the page to find out...

It was a shoe! A very old, very worn child's shoe, probably around 100 years old. Once Mark told me where he had found it, tucked on its side under the old shakes above the front door, I knew what it was and why it was there. It was a Concealment Shoe!! Here is, in all its well-used glory.

The story about these battered old pieces of foot wear is fascinating. Many years ago, when I was working as Curator at the Sharon Historical Society, Louise Brown asked me about a few old shoes that she and her husband

Malcolm had found in the walls while doing some renovation of their ancient house on Sharon Green. The shoes were all old, all and were accompanied by a 1911 newspaper. Realizing that she was on to something, researched the mystery, exploring the internet for information on concealed shoes. What told me sent me down a rabbit hole that I never really left - it's such a curious one.



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Human beings seem to have an odd weakness for superstition. Some of these superstitions are rather bizarre, lacking any rational explanation. Concealment Shoes definitely fall into this category. The custom dates back to possibly 14th century Western Europe, and is rooted in the ever-present need to ward off evil spirits. Somewhere, sometime long ago, someone was renovating his home, ripping out windows, maybe removing doors. Afraid that wandering wraiths from the underworld would waft into his home through these openings, he quickly hid a shoe in the nearby wall and felt better, safe from the impending danger. Others must have heard about it, because the custom caught on, reaching its peak in 18th and 19th century Great Britain and the northern United States.

Over the years since then, these long forgotten shoes are once again seeing the light of day as our old houses are being remodeled or restored. Most people have no idea what they have stumbled across when they rip the plaster from the wall and find an old shoe tucked into a hidden cavity. No doubt hundreds of these treasures have been thrown away, without being given a second thought beyond the often strange assumption that a child must have lost the shoe *in the wall*. Incredibly, however, enough have been documented that there is an international index of concealment shoes at the Northampton Museum in England, where over 2000 shoes are listed!

Children's shoes are the most common, followed by women's. They are almost always well worn, because shoes were much more expensive treasures then – one simply didn't have a closet full of shoes with plenty to spare (not a time when Imelda Marcos would have been happy!). Usually, there is just a single shoe, but occasionally members of a whole family each contributed a shoe in order to better protect their home.

While there is no documentation of when any individual shoe was placed in a wall, the consensus seems to be that it was done during renovation rather than original construction. According to Jennifer Swope at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, no one has ever photographed a concealment shoe in its discovered location. But increasingly, people have been savvy enough to realize that there is a reason for the shoes to be where they were found, and so they have been saved.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

SAVE THE DATE!



Almira Lucretia (Mills) Adams Perry, c. 1836, Kent, CT

Ammi Phillips, American Folk Art Painter (1788 – 1865), makes a return visit to Kent through his portraits painted nearly 190 years ago. He first visited Kent in 1836, painting many prominent citizens of the time. Over the course of his career, he produced over 1000 portraits, though he rarely signed them. Many of the sitters have since been identified but most have remained unidentified.

The Kent Historical Society is happy to announce our gala event of the year – “Kent Before Cameras: Ammi Painted the Town.” The opening preview party will take place October 1st, 2022, from 4:00pm

to 8:00pm in the newly renovated Gallery above the historic House of Books building. On October 8th, the exhibition will relocate to the historic Seven Hearths and will be open from 11am to 4pm through subsequent weekends, ending on October 23rd.

Come visit, learn and enjoy the history behind nearly 16 original works of art, as well as ten reproductions of early Kent people, all painted by Ammi Phillips. Visitors will also learn about the famous “Street Fair” that took place in 1924 which led to the discovery of who this infamous portrait painter was, as well as what a “limner” was. Also on display will be many more archival images and documentation pertaining to Ammi’s time spent in Kent in the early 1800s. More information regarding the October 1st event will be forthcoming.



did they have to return the shoes to the wall, and now a 20th century sneaker and high heel outside the Brown home on Upper Main St.

standing guard within your walls. If someday



Even

Mark *did* take a picture of our little shoe in its original spot, which we plan to send to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. You can just barely see the stitching side of the sole in the photo at left. The shoe has wooden pegs around the edge of the heel (not the photo). And, it looks like the wearer stepped on a thumbtack at some point. Ouch!

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Finding a concealment shoe here was a lovely reward for all of Mark's frustration with the faulty shakes. He returned the shoe to its original place over the schoolhouse door (above left). Although he didn't add one of his own the way the Browns did, he does have some that he found in his own house many years ago (one shown above right). It must have been a lovely little silk boot at one point. We can't help but wonder about the children who wore these shoes. Did they feel that they were doing their part to keep the family safe? Or, were they just happy to have a new pair of shoes?

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The cost of our beautiful new roof was covered in part by a **Historic Preservation Matching Grant** from the 1772 Foundation, in partnership with Preservation Connecticut.



The following generous members of the Kent Historical Society pitched in to

make the required 50% match for the grant. We can't thank you all enough, and would be happy to give you a tour of our little treasure at any time – once we get it cleaned up again!

Kip & Merry Armstrong, Susan & Ned Babbit, John & Carolyn Casey, Al & Terry Coffill, Don & Patti Hicks, Ted & Megg Hoffman, Claire Irving, Stan & Sandy Jennings, Katherine Skiff Kane (*whose ancestors built the schoolhouse*), Betty Krasne, Dick & Charlotte Lindsey, Lisa Lippman & Ben Finkelstein, Melanie Marks, Jeff Morgan, Perry Smith, Jerry & Gail Tobin, Char & Miles Weigel, James West, Christopher Williams, Michael Zients & Derrick Larson

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Kent Historical Society

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Please remember the Kent Historical Society in your will or estate plan. We are incredibly grateful for the visionary donors who have remembered us.



Our Mission:

We are a donor-supported nonprofit organization. Our mission is to collect, preserve, interpret and present the rich history of Kent as well as to provide educational and research material to enrich the public understanding of Kent's artistic and cultural heritage.

Become a member!
kenthistoricalsociety.org/membersh

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Tuesdays and Fridays 9am - noon,
or by appointment.

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