



Kent Historical Society Newsletter

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The Story of the Skiff Mountain Schoolhouse

by Marge Smith

After reading our story about the Concealment Shoe in the Skiff Mountain Schoolhouse roof, many of you asked about the history of the ancient building. That question was echoed when, in May, two generous students from the Marvelwood School volunteered to help me clean the schoolhouse in preparation for Kent Center School's annual Third Grade visit. As they sat at the old desks, the youngsters also asked about why the schoolhouse was there and why we now have it. Music to my ears!

With just a wee bit of prodding, the KCS kids guessed that the reason there were once 14 small schoolhouses scattered around town is that, because there were no cars or buses to transport children to school "back in the day," it would take too long to walk to one central location. Skiff Mountain is quite remote, so when the first settlers up there, who included Skiffs, Fullers and Goodsells, produced a number of offspring, a school district was formed. At some point early on, our schoolhouse was built on Skiff family land, though we don't know exactly when. But there are clues! The clapboarding on the outside was put on with cut nails. The woodwork inside is held together with cut nails, as is the one original desk, which indicates very early 19th century construction, as opposed to the use of wrought nails of the 18th century. Evidence also reveals it was once painted red – a real "Little Red Schoolhouse"!



Skiff Mountain children and their teacher, circa 1908

The first recorded teacher was Elijah Skiff (1774-1820), grandson of Proprietor Nathan Skiff and his wife Thankful Eaton. Elijah had eight sisters and brothers, some of whom no doubt were young enough to be his students. He later had two children of his own, and his numerous siblings also had children in need of schooling, so the building was often full of little Skiffs. Many years later, his great-niece Etta Skiff (born

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OUR DE-*LIGHT*-FUL SHOW AT SEVEN HEARTHES THIS SUMMER



The Kent Historical Society is proud to present the 2023 summer exhibit, “Sticks and Stands”; an intriguing collection of candlesticks and candlestands from the days before electricity. We’ve discovered that more than a few of you think that a “candlestick” is just the wax taper that is used to set a romantic dinner table, or search for when the power goes out. We’re willing to bet that most of you don’t know what a “candlestand” is at all! So, for your enlightenment, a candlestand is the small table on which the candlestick (holding the candle) rests. Now you need to come see some in person.

The gleaming display at Seven Hearths features about three dozen stands, all with their own candlesticks and candles. The dates range mostly through the 18th century, and they are arrayed throughout the first floor of the house, which itself dates to mid-18th century. There is a large round table filled with a great collection of period brass sticks, and a wide mantel shelf lined up with sticks of all different media. The candlestands are true works of art, and the exhibit sheds light on the different kinds of craftsmen who made them— Turners, Cabinetmakers, Chairmakers, Blacksmiths and Brassfounders.

There is even an illuminating quiz! And a couple of surprises! We promise a fun and enlightening visit. Our knowledgeable collectors, Roger Gonzales, Jeff Morgan and Frank Tosto will be on hand to answer questions and help you understand the contrast between today’s bright electric lighting and the softer lighting of yesteryear. How *they* did it with the lights on.

Just as with our popular 2022 chair exhibit, “Stick and Stands” tells the story of talented craftsmen who created objects of beauty in these very necessary, utilitarian home furnishings. Don’t miss it! Seven Hearths is open Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 4, until the end of August. We are also more than happy to take you through by appointment.

TWO UPCOMING EVENTS

PLACES OF KENT by Deborah Chabrian

This year 2023 is the 100th Anniversary of the Kent Art Association, and since the Kent Historical Society's house, Seven Hearths, was given to us from one of the KAA founders George Laurence Nelson, and I live in the house of one of the other founders Willard Dryden Paddock, I began to think about what drew these and many other artists to Kent in the first place. To this end I began to reread the book *Artists Of The Litchfield Hills*, by Robert Austin. In it he speaks of the northwest corner as being the most aesthetically perfect hills in the nation. I must say I would heartily agree, and of course it was the beauty of landscape that drew them here... the same thing that still draws many artists to Kent today.

Featured in the front of Austin's book is a large Early American landscape painting in oil on canvas, 30 3/4" x 46 3/8", painted in 1845. A few years back I was at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and I happened upon this painting, which I had never seen in person before. It was at once so familiar, that when I read the label, Jasper F. Cropsey, *Schatacook Mountain, Housatonic Valley, Connecticut 1845*, I thought to myself, of course it is familiar... it is literally in my own backyard! I have a view of Schaghticoke Mountain from my kitchen window. Cropsey, was visiting fellow landscape artist Charles Seely Gaylord (a student of Thomas Cole) in Gaylordsville. Cropsey was so taken with the landscape that he spent the summer of 1845 painting here in Kent and the studio in Gaylordsville. He describes one of their walks looking for scenes to paint in a most enthusiastic way:



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New Volunteers Wanted!

One of the most important KHS programs needs to be resurrected and we need your help to do it! When our indefatigable volunteer Ky Anderson passed away on March 3, 2019, the **Oral History** program stopped functioning. Many years before, Ky had happily taken on the responsibility of gathering priceless family memories from many of our older citizens, and for part of that time had a team of volunteers working with her. She also did many more by herself. Just as we were trying to figure out how to move ahead, Covid hit and the whole program was mothballed. Ky had a list of potential interviewees, but sadly we have lost a few of them since that time. So, we need to get back on track! If you would like to help with this fun program, please let Curator Marge Smith know.



In addition, we could use some office help with scanning photos, filing news clippings (also part of Ky's volunteering), and occasionally stuffing envelopes. Please email or call Marge for more information: curator@kenthistoricalsociety.org or 860-927-4587. Thank you!

Our Present Volunteers are Greatly Appreciated!

As you now know, Seven Hearths is open again for the summer with an intriguing display of antique candlesticks and candle stands. We can't do this without our volunteer docents. This summer, our hearty thanks go to Roger Gonzales, Jeff Morgan, Frank Tosto, Fran Goodsell and Karen Ianucci. Please stop by to see the exhibit and give them a pat on the back. Meanwhile, the Collections Committee has resumed meeting at Tallman House each Wednesday to work on processing the new donations that piled up during Covid as people stayed home and had time to clean out their attics and closets. Thank you, Beth Dooley, Louisa LaFontan and Nancy Schaefer! And finally, we have a new volunteer who is cataloging all of Laurence Nelson's papers that have long been in need of attention. Karen Lambdin is wading through box after box of correspondence, newspaper and magazine articles, notebooks and other items that Mr. Nelson saved. She is transcribing much of it, which is an amazing gift of time and patience. It is something that we have wanted to do for decades, and she is now finally making it happen. Thank you, Karen!

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1850) taught there as well. Her photo still hangs on the wall. Other teachers came and went over the years, with the last one being Ruth Buckingham who taught here until 1913, when a “new” school was built across the road. But the Skiffs never tore down the older one, and ownership of it stayed in the family until they deeded it to the Kent Historical Society in 1972.

During the time of the one-room schoolhouses, parents in each district were responsible for maintenance, financing, hiring, calendars and policy. A modest sum came from the Town Deposit Fund, a state fund derived from the original land sales establishing the town beginning in 1738. Families paid in cash, or by boarding the teacher or with firewood for the stove. Firewood provided by families varied from 1/8 cord to 40 feet per child. Teacher’s board was estimated at \$1 to not more than \$2 per week, and “boarding around” time was based on number of children in the family. Children walked two to three miles from the mountain farms and sometimes arrived by horse and wagon in colder weather. The school day went from 9AM to 4PM. The teacher arrived early to start the fire and clean up, and the first students went to the farmhouse across the street to collect drinking water in pails for the school day. Coats were hung in the hall with lunch pails on the floor below. The stove warmed cold feet in the winter, before classes started. Plank benches were the seats around three sides of the room, with tall narrow desks in front of the planks. More benches in front of the desks were used for recitation. Small children took their naps curled up on benches to the right of the teacher while she or he worked lessons with the older students. The original blackboard was plain board painted with flat enamel paint that could never erase clean. When “Miss Etta” Skiff taught here her father, Peter Skiff, would come to light the fire for her in the morning and would leave a funny sketch on the blackboard for the children.

Today, we have one desk that is original to the schoolhouse, with initials carved into the top by local children, some from the Tobin family. The rest of the interior is furnished with desks, chairs, and accessories from many of Kent’s old one room schoolhouses. Photographs of students and teachers from bygone days hang on the walls, over a collection of lunch pails and the communal water bucket. Framed “merit cards”, awarded weekly to the best students are also on display. Copy books and old textbooks are laid out for the Kent Center children to study when they come for their annual visit.



Emily Hopson, Jim Aiken and Katherine Skiff Kane on the day of celebration in 1976 when the schoolhouse finally opened after extensive repairs



A few weeks ago, we had a group of very special visitors. Several members of the Connecticut Chapter of the Colonial Dames of America had visited Seven Hearths earlier in June. Upon learning that we actually owned another ancient building, they came back to make the trek up the mountain. The photo here shows Ron Marasco, Jeff Morgan and Roger Gonzales with the excited members of the Chapter. Their president, Cathy McKenna, spoke of what a “unique treasure” it is and immediately asked if it could be marked with a plaque of recognition by their prestigious organization! She was most impressed by the care that has been taken by KHS to keep the circa 1799 building “unbelievably beautiful!” We agree!

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After reaching its summit and getting a view of the valley beyond which is beautiful, we loitered along its side toward the Housatonic River. We emerged from the dense woods into a cleared lot when before our delighted eye quite a lofty ridge of mountains stretched away their wooded slopes gradually down to the river which rolled unceasingly in its serpentine course visible only now & then for miles up the valley mill and scattering dwellings enliven its banks cattle dot the field adjacent to some murmuring brook or growing woods... From this place we plodded on to the banks of the river where we followed a rough though picturesq path, many points of beauty burst upon us as we wondered on...

Seeing this painting and reading his description, I thought to myself, I must find where his vantage point was to create this painting. I looked at maps to see where it might have been... and my best guesstimate was on top of Bull Mountain. I knew there had been a path there long ago and that the Kent Land Trust had in recent years made a new improved trail. So on Mother's Day, my wish was to hike the trail to the top and get a glimpse of this view. So Ed & I, Oliver and Gabriella went for a hike, searching for the view. While I must admit that the trees have filled in considerably since 1845, and Cropsey most likely worked from several plein-air sketches... we got glimpses of how it must have looked long ago. Breathtakingly beautiful! Marge Smith later told me stories of how her father would take students from South Kent School up to this same spot every year, to peer down at their campus in the valley below.



This was an aha moment for what show the Kent Historical Society would present as the follow up show to last year's *FACES OF KENT* art show, that featured portraits of Kent people, by Kent artists. This year it is *PLACES OF KENT*, A show of landscape paintings of Kent, by artists both historical and contemporary. We here at KHS are busy planning it for Saturday, October 7th in *The Gallery above the House of Books*. Details will soon be available on the KHS website or by calling the KHS office.

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MORE PLACES OF KENT MAY BE SEEN AT...

TOURING THE COUNTRYSIDE: POSTCARDS FROM CORNWALL, KENT, AND WARREN

A new collaborative exhibit at the Cornwall Historical Society
OPEN JULY 1 – OCTOBER 14, 2023
7 Pine St, Cornwall, CT Saturdays 10AM to 3PM

Since the late 19th century, Connecticut's northwest corner has drawn visitors to its natural beauty, rural charm and recreations. Picture postcards sent to family and friends by travelers spread the news of the area's attractions. Part of the late 19th century's revolution in communications, postcards from the Cornwall, Kent and Warren historical societies tell a local story, often delightfully inflected with enthusiastic commentary on the back. Like today's selfies, picture postcards helped to pin memories to notable spots; imagery publicized places worth visiting, and messages highlighted good times, travel information and connections between city origins and country sojourns. Vacations, camps, hiking, swimming, boating, fresh milk and eggs, and the scent of towering pine forests refreshed weary city dwellers, fueling what we know today as a thriving tourism industry.



From the collection of Michael Ward

Tourism in America grew from the second half of the 19th century, expanding as transportation networks linked rural destinations with cities via boat, train, cycle and, later, the car. Passenger trains of the Housatonic Railroad Company (sometimes operated as the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad Company) connected Litchfield County with New York City through Bridgeport. Brochures advertised excursions, and visitors might have been driven to local inns by carriages that met trains at depots at New Preston, Kent, Kent Falls, Cornwall Bridge, and West Cornwall. Early "League of American Wheelmen" cycling maps noted what roads the bicycles of the day could manage and advocated for road improvements. The rise of spare-time travel was spurred by the advent of paid vacations around 1910. As roads improved, car travel made even remote areas reachable in the Model T, which sold for only \$300 in 1924. Picture postcards became wildly popular at the 1893 Columbian Exposition. German companies and, later, US printers produced quantities. Until 1917, a penny stamp sufficed, and postage remained at two cents until the late 1950s. *Touring the Countryside: Postcards from Cornwall, Kent, and Warren* tells the story of rural pleasures and celebrates the merry flow of these affordable missives sent from Litchfield County.

The exhibition is made possible in part by a grant from Connecticut Humanities



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.

Kent Historical Society

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

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