

Charlestown Historical Society's Highlights 1968—2008



Teach, learn, preserve...

1968

The Charlestown Historical Society (CHS) was created in 1968. A concerned group of Charlestown residents felt the need for a strong "barn door" to protect the many historical "horses" yet remaining in town. The group felt that the vandalism and subsequent demolition of the Old Indian Schoolhouse might have been averted had there been a historical society to whom the owners of the building could have been referred. The destruction of the Indian Schoolhouse was a unique loss not only to Rhode Island but the National, and Native American histories as well. With that, the Society was born at an organizational meeting on October 24, 1968 at the home of Mrs. Lucy Rawlings Tootell in Richmond. Lucy Tootell was also the founder of the Pettaquamscutt Historical Society and the Richmond Historical Society. Also, present at the meeting were: Reverend and Mrs. Harold Mars, Princess Redwing, Tall Oak, Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Eccelston,

Mrs. Alex Fuller, Mr. Charles Stowell, Mrs. Willis Snow, Mr. Ken Merrifield, and Mrs. Brenda Brophy. Unable to attend, but wishing to be a part of the group were, Mrs. Hubert Kelley, Mrs. Bruce Randall, Mrs. Charles Stowell and Mr. Bob Bankel. There were 101 Charter Members of the Society and many of these individuals were Trustees or active volunteers of the Cross' Mills Library.

1969

Tuesday, January 28, 1969 marked the first meeting of the CHS, which was held at the General Stanton Inn. More than 60 people attended, including representatives from neighboring historical societies in Richmond, Hopkinton, Westerly and Pettaquamscutt. Our first president, Mrs. Brenda Brophy, who resigned and moved to New Zealand was replaced by our newly elected president James Skiller. Other officers included Robert Barkel, Recording Secretary; Reverend Harold Mars, Treasurer; Mrs. Harold Mars, Representative to the Executive Council; Mrs. Alexzine Bradsaw, Corresponding Secretary; Mrs. Earl Brunskil, Representative to the Executive Council and Mrs. Dwight Wilson, Vice president.

1972

Ernestine Swanson donates the District #2 Schoolhouse to the Society. This schoolhouse was built in Quonochontaug, Charlestown in 1838 and stood behind what was once the Quonnie Forum, on land that was donated by Lieutenant Governor Edward Wilcox. When first opened, there were only 36 stars on the United States Flag. Boys and girls each had their own separate entryway and coatroom. The Schoolhouse was in use until 1916, and thereafter was deserted and fell into ruin.

1973

Cross' Mills Library Board of Trustees offers the CHS 10,000 sq. ft. of land with which to accomplish the move of the schoolhouse from Quonochontaug to Cross' Mills and in June it moves to its present location.

1974

CHS acquires the Charlestown Naval Auxiliary Landing Field sign from the United States Navy, which is placed beside the Charlestown Naval Airfield Memorial at Nini-gret Park. This 10-ton monument is a permanent reminder, and dedicated to the memory of those 62 Naval aviators and aircrew who lost their lives while flying from Charlestown Naval Auxiliary Air Station (NAAS) during the years from 1943 to 1965.

1975

CHS publishes a booklet on "*The District #2 Schoolhouse*" documenting its history.

1976

CHS participates with the Charlestown Bicentennial Book Committee in its efforts to recognize the Bicentennial Year. The Society sponsors the "*Colonial Boys of Charlestown*", 24 boys that well represent our town in all the Bicentennial functions. The Bicentennial Book Committee produces "*Reflections of Charlestown 1876 – 1976 – A Memorial to the Bicentennial Celebration of the Untied States of America*."

1977

CHS receives \$5,000 from the Charlestown Bicentennial Committee for the purpose of helping to build a permanent home "for the town's historical items and archives." Plans for this permanent home, drawn by Laima Glista, feature a 1760 Colonial building as an example of what the building committee hopes to build in the future. The Bicentennial Committee visualizes an historical and cultural complex on the Cross' Mills Public Library and district #2 Schoolhouse grounds.

1979

CHS publishes "*The Historical Story of Charlestown, Rhode Island*" by Frances Wharton Mandeville.

1984

Cross' Mills Library is looking to expand and the CHS donates \$10,000 to Cross' Mills Library to aide in its ex-

pansion. Society members look forward to a new room for meetings and space to display collections.

1984

Grand opening of the District #2 Schoolhouse represents thousands of hours of work by society members and volunteers in the community. Regular summer hours are Wednesday 2:30 – 4:30 PM and on Saturdays from 10:00 AM to Noon. The District #2 Schoolhouse is always available by appointment for schools and others looking to visit the Schoolhouse.

1974 – 1987

Ann Crawford, Library Director at Cross' Mills Public Library, has been the Charlestown Historical Society Program Chair and has successfully scheduled hundreds of programs for the Society and citizens of the Town of Charlestown. It has been written in one of our newsletters that Steven Spielberg could not have produced better entertainment programs over the years than that of Ann Crawford.

1985

Construction starts on the expansion of Cross' Mills Public Library. During November the Library closes temporarily so that the new addition can "breakthrough" to the old. Everyone in town takes out six weeks of reading materials and waits for the re-opening. Meeting and lectures are held at the First Baptist Church in the interim.

1986

Cross' Mills Public Library reopens. The Society has its first meeting in the new meeting room during March of 1986 with guest speaker Captain Albert Rodrick, of the sloop "*Providence*" out of Newport's Seaport '76.

1986 – 1996

CHS conducts historical essay contests for the 5th and 6th graders, which are collected for our archives.

1992

For a mere \$16,000 CHS renovates District #2 Schoolhouse to get ready for the next 20 years. Structural work to the flooring, sills, roof, outhouse and siding are the bulk of the improvements.

1993

CHS celebrates our 25th year and continues to fund the purchase of historical reading materials at Cross' Mills Library and the Charlestown Elementary and Middle Schools.

1995

CHS celebrates over \$35,000 awarded to deserving students in the form of annual scholarships. The ability of the Society to make these scholarships available is heavily dependent on the generosity of its members, local business people and also the annual Summer Fair and Antique Show held at Strawberry Field, home of Sarah Browning, on Old Post Road.

1985 – 1995

CHS presents plaques to historical houses and places in Charlestown. These plaques are presented as a most fitting Bicentennial gesture for the Town of Charlestown. The signs are of white, baked-on aluminum with the lovely seal of the Society used as a background for the names and the dates of the buildings. Houses selected for plaques are qualified for the National Registry by the State of Rhode Island Commission.

1999 – 2000

CHS celebrates our 30th anniversary and acquires a 1839 Charlestown census map from 92 year old Mrs. Ethel Taylor Newton of Stafford Springs, CT. This map hung in the District 2 schoolhouse, which Mrs. Newton attended as a young girl.

CHS begins recruitment of community minded individuals and past members to commit time and service for the continuation of the Charlestown Historical Society into the 21st Century. Some members focus on gathering

oral histories or photographs for archives. Others focus on administrative tasks in order to assure that the Society remains in good standing and that the corporation documents and by-laws are reflective of goals and purpose of the Society.

2002 – 2004

CHS begins collecting over 200 photographs that are needed for a future book with Arcadia Publishing. Many of the Society's collection of photographs have previously been used for earlier publications of books, but the Society continues to request any original photographs that residents and members would like to donate.

2004 – 2005

CHS contributes the history of our organization to our town's new newspaper, "*The Charlestown Press*". CHS also welcomes lifetime member Sherrill Reeves to the Schoolhouse to help open gifts presented to the Society by Mary Lou Hutchings of EAST-WEST FARM in Quonochontaug. "*The Charlestown Press*" covers the gathering.

2005 – 2006

CHS participates in the on-going discussions with the Newport World Heritage Committee regarding its efforts to designate Newport as an Official World Heritage Site. Charlestown, the only town in Rhode Island to be named after King Charles II, the English King who granted Rhode Island its Charter of 1663. It has been noted, "The Charter of Rhode Island of 1663 has been universally recognized as the most liberal state paper ever issued by the English Crown." In it, absolute religious freedom was for the first time in the history of the world secured and guaranteed. It was so democratic, both in letter and spirit, that doubts were entertained in England whether the King had a right to grant it. It was so broad, so practical, so efficient in its provisions that it continued in force until the Colony became a state, and then served as the Constitution of the "State of Rhode

Island and Providence Plantations" for 67 years until 1843 when the present State Constitution was adopted. This Charter of 1663 was procured by Dr. John Clarke. This guarantee of religious liberty as a vindication of Roger Williams' beliefs and royal recognition of the fundamental principles upon which the Providence Plantation was founded "absolute freedom of conscience and complete separation of Church and State." This was the "lively experiment" upon which the government of Rhode Island was based. The Society supports Newport in its World Heritage Site designation is proud to represent the Town of Charlestown as having been named in the honor and memory of King Charles II.

2007

CHS partners with members of the Quonochontaug Historical Society in efforts to pursue a permanent museum that the Bicentennial Committee visualized as an historical and cultural complex in 1977.

CHS participates in the 2nd Annual History and Cultural Fair at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center.

CHS sponsors a presentation by Charlotte Taylor, Senior Historic Preservation Specialist, RI Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission of Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) who presents a History of Fort Ninigret and shows artifacts, including a rare Jesuit ring, from archeological excavations performed at Fort Ninigret.

2008

Our goals this year are the renovation of Old Fort Ninigret, the renovation of the District #2 Schoolhouse and the transfer of our archives to the Charlestown Town Hall for preservation. However, some gifts and donations will continue to be displayed at Cross' Mills Library.

Currently, fundraising efforts continue and CHS is

gathering information on our lifetime members as well as updating our member mailing list. This 40-year history of our organization is to celebrate the hard work, dedication and achievements of the Society's members. Each year noted in the Society's review represents hundreds upon hundreds of volunteer hours by our members. We salute you for a job well done! Lets move on to the next 40 years, and beyond!

This 40-year history was prepared by our Recording Secretary, Sandra Puchalski with excerpts garnered from newsletters and archived articles.



District 2 Schoolhouse, circa 1838
National Historic Register
Charlestown, Rhode Island

www.charlestownri.org

Charlestown Historical Society
P.O. Box 100
Charlestown, RI 02813