

Williamstown Historical Museum

Newsletter

Williamstown, Mass.

Autumn, 2014

Mather House on the move

By Charles Bonenti

From the time of its settlement, Williamstown has constantly rearranged itself, houses shifting from lot to lot as economic needs dictate. A prime example of such relocation is Mather House, moved from Stetson Court to 63 North St. on November 19.

The two-story, Federal-style, plank dwelling was built in the 1790s according the 1998 Williamstown Historical Commission (WHC) inventory on file at the Williamstown Historical Museum. While the original occupants are unknown, it is named for Benjamin Franklin Mather (1810-1888), a ninth generation descendent of the prominent Cotton and Increase Mather family of New England clergymen and authors.

The son of a Pownal, VT hatter, Benjamin Mather became one of Williamstown's leading merchants, opening a general store (which no longer exists) to the west of his house. He and his wife, Mary Bridges Mather, raised 10 children, all born at home.

One of them, Charles, opened his own store at the corner of Main and Park streets, site of the present Faculty House/ Alumni Center. Some sources put the original Mather House on that site, but the WHC inventory and an 1889 map by surveyor Alexander Walker in the Williams College digital archives both list Charles as owner of that property and locate Benjamin's house and store further west.



B. F. Mather House on Main Street

Williams College bought Mather House in 1905, according to the WHC survey, along with other properties between Park and North streets and used it as faculty housing, an Honors Work Center, and Phi Beta Kappa headquarters before turning it into the Admissions Office in 1971. It was renovated in 1956, enlarged in 1976 and remodeled again in 1984 and in 2002.

Henry N. Flynt, Sr., a 1916 Williams graduate and a trustee, successfully argued for preserving Mather House in


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1956 rather than razing it as was originally planned, recalled his son, Henry N. Flynt Jr. (Williams, 1944). The elder Flynt, who with his wife, Helen, restored many buildings in Old Deerfield, supervised the 1956 renovation by Old Deerfield architect Bill Gass. Dating it to the 1790s, they removed many added Victorian details, giving it its present look.

On Stetson Court, Mather housed the college's Experiential Education Office, among others.

Its latest buyer, Vincent Guntlow of Guntlow & Associates, said he plans to use it for offices and apartments.

The fate of Harper House at 54 Stetson Court is uncertain. College plans for a new dormitory on the site mean it too must be moved or demolished. Harper house is named for former Williams Latin professor George Harper and his wife, Sylvia. It last housed the college's Center for Environmental Studies and Zilkha Center for Sustainability. College spokesman James Kolesar said one potential buyer has shown interest, but no agreement has been reached. 



Is this B. F. Mather?

This photo was found in an 1875 album and was labeled as "Mather"



Harper house (black shutters) with Mather house on the move in 2002



Mather house on the move in 2002



...and again in 2014

Living History Day, Sled Reconstruction

WHM - WRLF collaborative program at Sheep Hill

Though this program took place on November 1st, stay tuned for additional work days throughout the winter.

(1) Art Evans stokes the fire used to heat the iron pins that hold the runners on the sled; (2) Joyce Harsch talks to Leslie Reed-Evans of WRLF while Cathy Talarico, also of WRLF, prepares to plane a runner; (3) Hugh Glover sizes up a plane while Janette Kessler and Joyce Harsch look on; (4) historic photo of Alfred Place on sled with articulated runners, similar to the sled being restored at Sheep Hill



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Williamstown
Historical
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Located in the Milne Public Library
1095 Main Street, Williamstown, MA 01267
413-458-2160
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1



2

Here are a few recent arrivals to the collection. Images 1, 2 and 3 are from Barbara Cirone, daughter of photographer Rand Trabold and images 4 and 5 are from Ann Ott.

(1) Greylock Hotel at Sand Springs; (2) view of Williamstown and North Adams from Taconic Trail; (3) Eddis Kronick working the pump (at the current location of Karen Lartin, DDS –dentist at 279 Main St.); (4) Bacon's Garage on Water Street; (5) planning the removal of a pick-up truck from the Green River, a group surveys the scene



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From the WHM board president

By Pat Leach

We've Really Got Something to Celebrate!

Let's celebrate a new Williamstown holiday: Proprietors' Day, December 5th.


What on earth is that?!

December 5 is the day in 1753 when the proprietors of the "west Township at Hoosuck," as our village was then known, first gathered in the home of Dr. Seth Hudson "at Nine of the Clock in the four noon" to launch our local government—voting on officials and committees and yes, levying small fees to pay expenses incurred as the propriety carried out its business.

That the village, as a propriety, could officially hold legal meetings was approved by the Massachusetts Bay Colony's House of Representatives on September 10, 1753. On November 15th, the Poontoosuck Justice of the Peace William Williams, Esq., in partnership with proprietor Isaac Wyman, issued the first warrant for a legal meeting of our proprietors. At that December 5th meeting, working committees and temporary offices were created and the business of laying out the land, the main street, and the "s'd township's highways" was also begun. On December 5th too, it was voted to raise 10 shillings (½ of a Massachusetts pound) to pay for a **Proprietors Book** in which the propriety's records would be kept until the end of the century.

Of this precious and still extant town document, the **Proprietors Book**, our most distinguished town historian Arthur Latham Perry said:

"It is thus that we learn in detail, through a single example, the best lesson that New England has had of teaching to the world at large. The roots of all our civil politics, municipal and state and national, are uncovered and displayed....(in our) humble *magna charta*..."

No one could have said it better. 

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1095 Main Street

Williamstown, MA 01267

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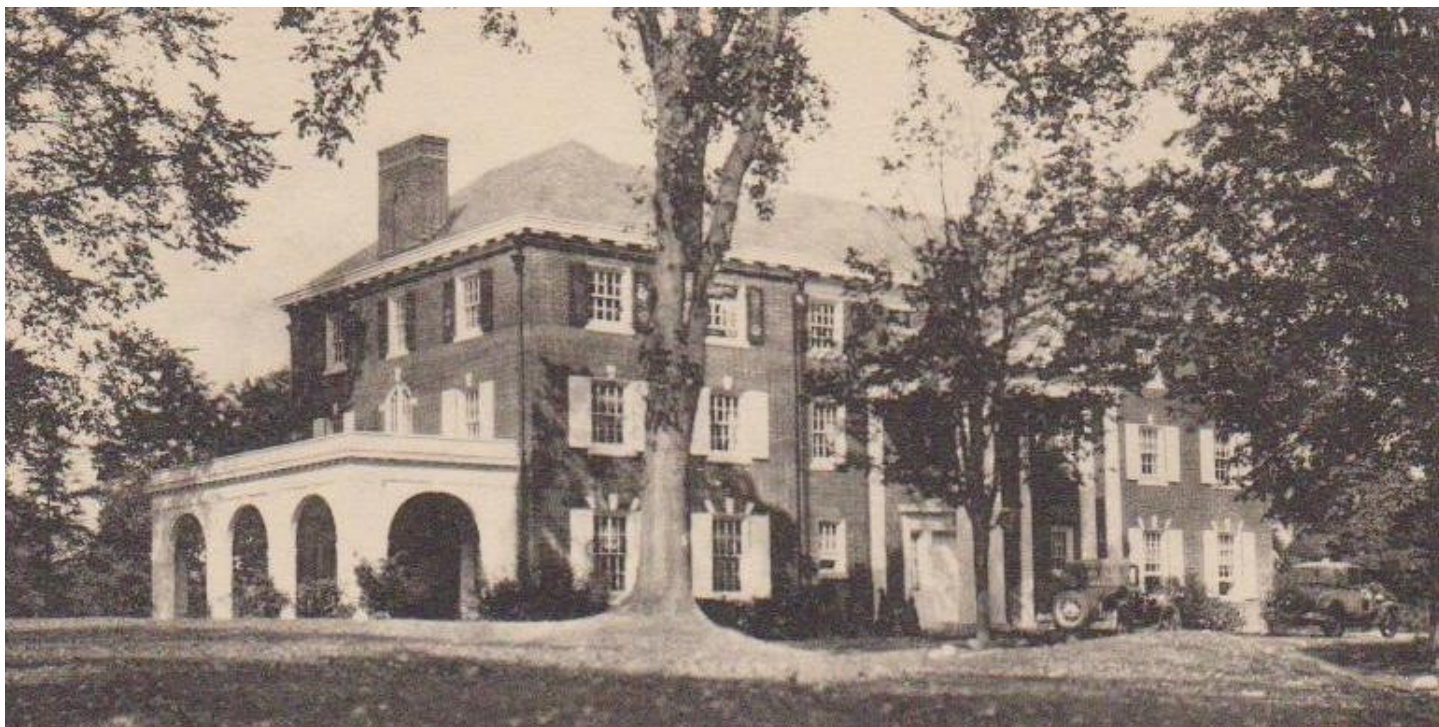
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Phi Gamma Delta House on North Street, now the Municipal Building

Looking back

By D. R. Bahlman

Observers of current events are likely to agree that some issues tend to be cyclic. Like a song's refrain, they "come around" regularly, their comforting familiarity inviting participation.

In Williamstown, land at the south end of Spring Street has been a focal point of public debate over the years, a decade-or-so ago as the proposed location of a new performing arts center for Williams College and currently the possible site of a "boutique" inn, also a college project. The former American Legion now occupies some of the land.

Fifty years ago, as townspeople considered options for relocating the seat of local government from cramped quarters on Main Street, the Spring Street property was often mentioned.

Conducting "man on the street" interviews on the topic in November 1964, *The Williamstown News*, the local weekly paper, published this response from "A Taxpayer." "We sure need a town office building, but why not take over one of the fraternities or something? The town can't afford to build anything right now."

As taxpayers often do, this one put a finger on the eventual outcome of the debate: In 1966, the town purchased the college's former Phi Gamma Delta fraternity on North Street and converted it into municipal offices.

Voters at a town meeting in March 1949 deferred action on a warrant article calling for the appropriation of \$50,000 for the purchase of the site for a hospital. Instead, they backed formation of a committee to be appointed by the moderator to study the issue and report at the next town meeting.

Fashion choices, always a fairly hot topic, were the subject of another set of interviews of passers-by in December 1964. Two Spring Street merchants, asked for their opinions of Williams students' attire, expressed strong disapproval: "atrocious," said one. "Deplorable," said the other.

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A “faculty wife” took a more moderate view. “It doesn’t bother me so much any more,” she said. “Some of them used to go to class in their PJs. Actually, it’s only a few who give a bad impression.”

To a local third-grader, the issue was moot. “I like college students. I don’t care how they dress,” the youngster said.

A Sunday outing in November of 1964 brought Albert Bachand and Norman Jorgensen from North Adams to Pownal, Vt., by an unusual route: the Hoosac River.

According to an account in the Williamstown News, they set off downstream from North Adams at about 11 a.m. and arrived in Pownal at about 3:30 p.m., having covered about seven miles of river, which Bachand noted was at low ebb. This demanded “considerable pushing and pulling,” the newspaper reported, adding that the trip normally takes about two hours.

Bachand, the developer of The Spruces mobile home park, was familiar with the route. In 1942, he and Louis Vincette departed North Adams by boat and got as far as Stillwater, N.Y. Neither the time nor the mileage of the trip was reported.

For shoppers, the pages of the Williamstown News presented wondrous things for the approaching holidays of 1964. A Magnavox color TV, in either “antique ivory” or “distressed cherry” could be purchased at Gagliardi’s on Union Street in North Adams for \$595. Two less elaborate sets also were on offer for \$498 and \$449, respectively.

At LoPresto’s Shoes in the Colonial Shopping Center, Dexter slip-on loafers were selling in the \$9.95 to \$13.99 range.

“Here’s a bonding movie without excessive gossip, without friends stabbing each other in the back,” was the Williamstown Advocate reviewer’s assessment of the newly-released film “Steel Magnolias” in 1989. Although he found the movie’s “shifts” between time periods mildly distracting, Aaron Milenski gave the film three stars.

A car shopper’s eye may have been drawn to an ad for Bedard Bros. Honda, where a 1990 four-door Accord was selling for \$12,695. The price for the smaller 1990 Honda Civic was \$9,700. A 1990 244 DLA Volvo sedan was \$18,499. ~

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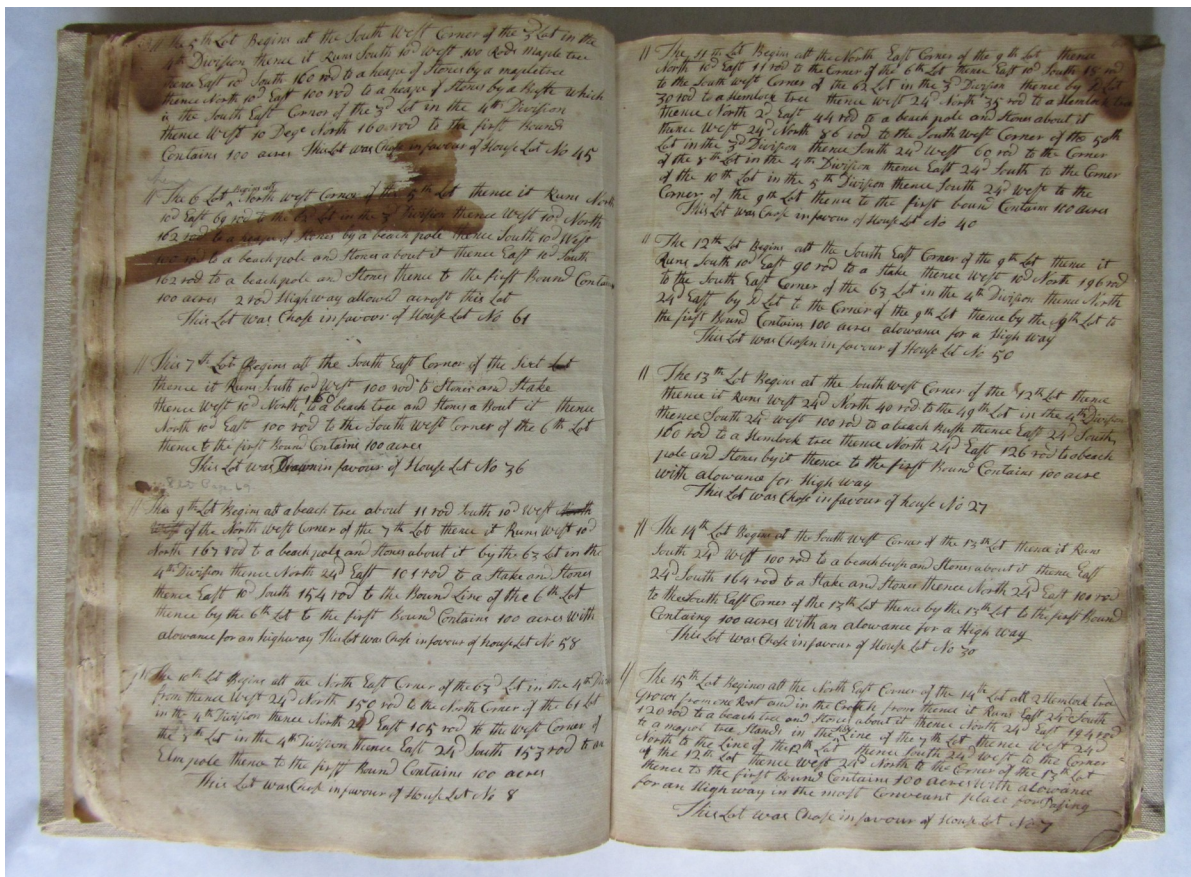


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