

Williamstown Historical Museum

Newsletter

Williamstown, Massachusetts

February 2018

Nancy Burstein, Remembrances 1947-2017

By Annette Jenks



Nancy Burstein

Nancy Burstein was the first person to be hired as a curator for the Williamstown House of Local History (WHLH). The position of curator was created in the 1980s, the result of an offer from the Massachusetts Historical Commission to help preserve historical materials in the cities and towns of Massachusetts. Upon the WHLH Board's response to the offer, a member of the

Commission visited the museum, housed on the second floor of the Elizabeth Sanford Botsford Memorial Building. The historian offered to help obtain a grant to pay for an intern to inventory the museum's collection. Deborah Schilke, a college intern from Roger Williams University, spent several months listing and labelling all the artifacts according to an established archival system. When her work was finished, it was apparent that the museum required a curator to continue to manage the collection, create exhibits, and interact with the public.

Ads were placed in the local newspapers describing the curator position. At the time, I was Director of the public library, which was located below the museum on the first floor of the Botsford Memorial Building. I was also a member of the WHLH Board. Mary McMahon, president of the Board, asked me to join to interview the applicants. Nancy was among those who responded to the ads. During our interview with her, we were particularly impressed with one of Nancy's qualifications: she had previously researched and written about the history of Petersburg, N.Y., where she resided. We thought she

Remembrances continued on page 2

Christmas Lake and Culverts in an Ever-Changing Town

By Sarah Currie

Williamstown and Williams College are frequently changing — buildings, landscapes, and roads are modified, moved, and transformed at a steady clip. One of the most recent and noticeable construction projects is taking place in the Spring/Latham/Water Streets area. Large culverts are being installed to divert a stream called Christmas Brook below ground as it flows toward the Green River near the intersection of Meacham and Water Streets. Articles in *iBerkshires* and *The Berkshire Eagle* have described the project, including a piece by Scott Stafford of *The Berkshire Eagle* in which he notes, "Williams College has stepped up to design and build a \$21 million storm water drainage system through the low lying parcel of land at the bottom of Spring Street."



Water Street Culvert Construction, January 2018

Local history enthusiasts may be intrigued by the story of this area when Christmas Brook ran above ground. The landscape at the base of Spring Street looked rather different before the original culvert was installed by Williams College in 1964.

Christmas Brook flows roughly from Stone Hill through the Taconic Golf Course to Latham Street, through the parking lot by the Williams College heating plant, along Meacham Street, under Water Street and into the Green River. A portion of Christmas Brook called Phebe's Brook, which currently runs in the culvert under

Christmas Lake continued on page 4

Remembrances: Continued

was by far the best candidate and offered her the position. The museum's small budget limited the number of hours we could offer, but Nancy agreed to them and she accepted the position.

Once Nancy was installed in the office and the museum was open during her working hours, members of the community volunteered to assist Nancy in any way she required. Catherine "Katie" Winn was one of those who spent most days with her in the office. Shirley Sylvester helped Nancy put together exhibits.



Annette Jenks, Nancy Burstein, and Katie Winn at the Botsford House in 1997

Soon after I retired from my position in the library in 1993, the WHLH and the library moved to larger space at the other end of Main Street. The WHLH, a designated non-profit organization, took over more of the historical research requests that were previously handled by the library. With more free time in my retirement, I volunteered to relieve Nancy of the time it took to respond to those requests. When I needed to find an elusive item Nancy's knowledge of the collection was invaluable. Volunteers became more involved in the museum, taking part in various town events such as the Fourth of July parade, the Holiday Walk and open house days at the Rural Lands Foundation. Nancy, Katie and I wore early American costumes to those events and also dressed up for our WHLH events. We all enjoyed the companionship, while promoting the WHLH.



Annette Jenks, Katie Winn, and Nancy Burstein march in the Fourth of July Parade in 1996.



Richard Dodds, Richard Hoar, and Nancy Burstein during the installation of the permanent exhibit

When Nancy learned about permanent exhibits through the larger historical museum network, she was intrigued at the idea of having such an exhibit in our museum. A designer was paid to produce a detailed layout that Nancy could work with. She then put a tremendous amount of effort into planning the placement of articles in the exhibit according to the layout. When she was finished and satisfied with the plan, she asked Bunny Smith and me to undertake the job of mounting the exhibit items. We worked hard to justify the proposed arrangement and it was a pleasure to do it because it had been so meticulously planned. The exhibit was Nancy's most ambitious project.

When Nancy first took the position of curator, I immediately respected her judgment and opinions. I continued to feel that way through all the years I worked with her.



Nancy Burstein and Hank Flynt talk history at the Botsford House.

Kindness and Candor, Humility and Strength

By Sarah Currie

Nancy Burstein, former Director and Curator at the Williamstown House of Local History and Williamstown Historical Museum, passed away on November 18, 2017. Nancy worked for the Museum for more than 25 years before retiring in 2013. She is missed and much remembered.

Nancy often described the museum as the "little engine that could." It seems to me she approached life with the same drive used in her metaphor for the museum. She was a petite but powerful woman who faced the vicissitudes of life with an openness to the opportunities that the ups and downs presented. Nancy had a steady resolve to overcome challenges and faced adversity with great determination and a grounded understanding of her humanness. Her humility was striking and her ability to be honest and vulnerable in moments where it mattered most was admirable.

Kindness and Candor continued on page 6



Nancy Burstein at the 2013 WHM Annual meeting retirement recognition with HLH and WHM friends. In Front: Sam Westcott; Second Row (L-R): Nancy Burstein, Bunny Smith, Cynthia Payne, Meg Dodds, and David Loomis; Back Row: Annette Jenks, Susan Schneski, and Dick Dodds.

President's Remarks

Dear Members and Friends,

Happy New Year! I am looking forward to what the WHM will be doing in 2018. For now, however, let's reflect on some of the highlights of 2017:

- The Grand Opening in June of our new space in the former South Center School in South Williamstown.

Kathy Thompson

- Popular lectures, open to the public, on topics including the *North Adams Transcript*, the Masons, Fort Massachusetts, and the history of the Botsford House.

- A community service project of collecting food and money for the Williamstown Food Bank.

- Our year-end Holiday Open House with traditional music provided by the a capella group Singing School. Refreshments were served to a full house of guests, who also enjoyed visiting our exhibits.

We will miss our board member Katie Nash, who will be leaving her job as College Archivist and Special Collections Librarian at Williams to become University Archivist and head of the University Archives at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Congratulations to Katie on her new position.

Enjoy this winter issue of our newsletter. I call special attention to the articles about former Curator and Director Nancy Burstein, who passed away in November 2017. The members of the WHM Board of Directors and our Executive Director, Sarah Currie, send condolences to her family.

Thank you for your continued support. Without it, none of our 2017 highlights would have happened.

Best Regards,

Kathy Thompson

**Williamstown
Historical
Museum**

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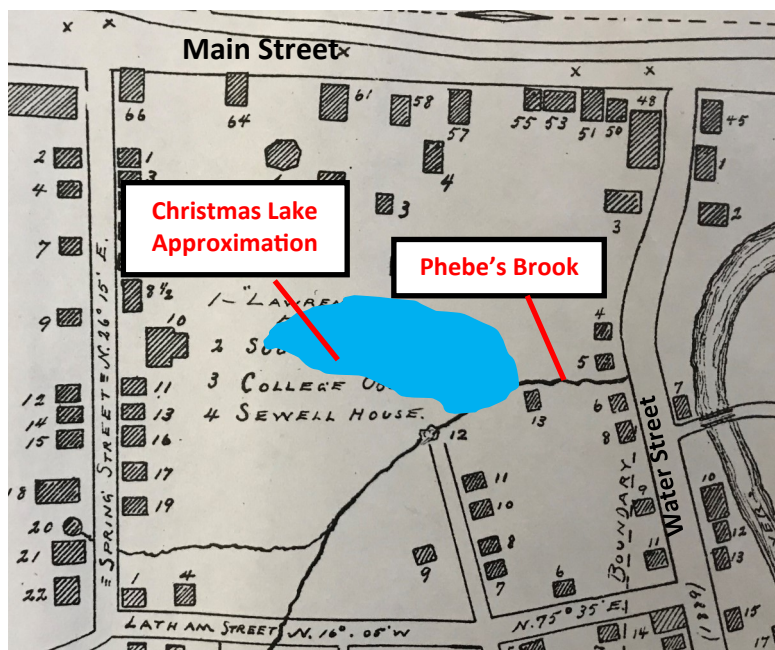
Christmas Lake continued

under the parking lots near the fieldhouse and the heating plant, was dammed to create what became Christmas Lake. Phebe's Brook is named after a well-known downtown resident, Phebe Holmes, who lived in a small house near the College Spring at the base of Spring Street. Curiously, it is claimed by A. L. Perry in *Origins in Williamstown* that her husband was "stabbed and nearly killed" at a turkey shoot near the "Still Spring."

William J. Cartwright's February 1953 entry in *Williamstown the First 200 Years* provides a useful account of the lake.

Christmas Lake and the old campus turned the full cycle of a century today.

Just before the middle of the 19th Century there was a movement in the college led by Professor Ebenezer Kellogg and Professor Albert Hopkins to beautify its



View of Christmas Lake looking south toward Stone Hill
Courtesy of Williams College Archives and Special Collections

grounds. Professor Kellogg laid out, with the assistance of students, a garden plot south of West College. Professor Hopkins built a house on Main Street near the foot of Consumption Hill. His interest in Nature led him to plant a large variety of flowers and trees in the rear of his home. The off shoots of some can still be found behind Berkshire Hall.

In the early 1850's the college used some of its meager funds under Prof. Hopkins' direction to improve the grounds. The land east of Spring Street, and known since as the Old Campus, was purchased. A wooden gymnasium was erected on the northern part of this land and a baseball field south of it. On the side hill to the east, a modest park was created adjoining Prof. Hopkins' garden.

Phebe's Brook ran through the southern part of this land. To carry out the park effect a stone wall dam was built and the water of the brook allowed to flood the lower part, forming a small lake about 200 by 80 feet wide with a little island in the middle. Overhanging elms shaded one side and pine trees were planted on the shores, a few of which still survive. The name Christmas Lake was given to it by Professor Hopkins in 1875. It was a very pretty spot in summer and attractive in winter as a skating pond... The dam was rebuilt twice, once after the freshet of 1869 and again in 1875 with the help of a gift from Cyrus W. Field. In 1879 an attractive foot-bridge with rustic palings [sic] was erected over the dam completing a much traveled business section of Spring Street. By 1889, however, regret was expressed because the lake had been neglected.



Christmas Lake looking north

The degradation of this lovely spot began when the sewer line from South Street was laid along the former lake bottom and on to the Green River outlet. The northern shore of the lake became a common dump to fill in the depression. When the college heating plant was built in 1903, this spot was turned into a camp site for the laborers.



Christmas Lake looking south, circa 1870.

The next year a final attempt was made to restore Christmas Lake for hockey. The dam was rebuilt and the water froze quickly, but alas, the water drained off into the sewer line, and the scheduled hockey games had to be called off. Now a huge pile of coal and heaps of dirt from recent excavations for new buildings mark the site.



Water Street looking north, near the outlet of Phebe's Brook into the Green River, current site of Water Street culvert construction , circa 1890s

Many thanks to Mike Miller for providing helpful information and feedback for this article. Thanks, also, to Tim Kaiser for providing the original date of the culvert installed by Williams College and to the Williams College Archives and Special Collections for use of one of the photos on page four.

WHM Spring Programs 2018

Sunday, March 4, 2018, 3:00 p.m. - Benefit for the WHM, *Rural Roots: Historic Music* by Singing School, Second Congregational Church Sanctuary, 81 Hancock Road. Suggested donation, \$5.00.

Saturday, April 7, 2018, 2:00 p.m. - *Isaac Stratton Revolutionary War Commemoration*, Southlawn Cemetery. At this cooperative program between the WHM and SWCA, a brief commemoration will be followed by refreshments at the WHM.

Saturday, April 14, 2018, 11 a.m. - *Reflections on Growing Up in Williamstown: Round Table Discussion*, Community Hall, First Congregational Church, 795 Main Street

Saturday, May 26, 2018, 11 a.m. - *Letters in a Box: WWII Letters*, presented by Sheila Stone. Williams Inn Heritage Room, 1090 Main Street

Tentative: Saturday, June 23, 2018, 11 a.m. - location TBD (possibly Milne Public Library), *The Families of Mount Greylock*, Mike Whalen and Sarah Currie

Visit the WHM website to view videos of past programs, courtesy of WilliNet.
www.williamstownhistoricalmuseum.org



Festive music was presented by Singing School at the December 10, 2017, Open House at the WHM.

Digital Research Resources Available at the WHM!

Visit the Williamstown Historical Museum to access digital research resources including Ancestry.com, Newspapers.com and NewspaperArchive.com. Generous support from the Milne Public Library and Friends of the Milne Public Library allows us to use the library edition of Ancestry.com. Staff and docents are available to get you started on your research today! You may also access our collection online by visiting www.williamstown.pastperfectonline.com.

Kindness and Candor continued

Nancy's thoughtful consideration of all sides of an issue enabled her to see the "big picture" better than many, and allowed her to help the museum grow. Starting from a few rooms on the second floor of the Botsford Memorial Building, Nancy directed the organization as it evolved into a local history museum valued by the town and whose exhibits, programs, and collection became treasured resources available to the entire community.

Nancy's love of history and education, and especially teaching young children, was evident in all of her endeavors for the museum. In her pursuit of a Master's in Education degree, Nancy was introduced to the museum in the early 1980s. She worked on a history of Petersburg for elementary aged children for what I believe was her graduate thesis, and produced a wonderful document that can be found online at:

<http://www.petersburghpubliclibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Petersburg-Portrait.pdf>.

The product of her research made such a positive impression that she was asked to work at the House of Local History as a part time curator, remaining at the position for more than two decades.

Nancy often told me that the work she did at the museum allowed her to raise her children and continue to work in a field that she valued. During her time at the museum Nancy shepherded numerous advancements in all aspects of the organization while raising three wonderful children. Nancy developed the collections system that serves as the framework for our current digital system and led us toward best practices in the handling, recording, and storing of collection items. She developed policies and procedures that are essential to the proper functioning of an organized and professional historical museum and archive, and she introduced dozens of educational outreach programs and exhibits.



Nancy Burstein speaks with Annette Jenks and another member about the "Faces of Williamstown" wall in the Orientation Exhibit.

As the museum moved from the Botsford Memorial Building to the Milne Library, Nancy oversaw the move and then the development of an orientation exhibit that was highly regarded by visitors. This exhibit about the town's history was remounted in the new space of the WHM in South Williamstown and continues to serve as one of the town's treasured pieces. She developed a children's discovery room, produced a highly successful town-wide family day, and supported the creation of numerous exhibits and programs focusing on Williamstown's history. As a primary contributor to the organization's newsletters she wrote compelling articles about unique artifacts in the collection and made helpful suggestions about activating children's interest in history.



Nancy Burstein receives a grant from the Ronald McDonald House for the Children's Discovery Room.

Nancy taught me how to do much of what I do at the museum: cataloging acquisitions, working with the board, engaging with visitors, and countless other facets of my work at the WHM. She showed me how to responsibly serve the museum and the community. I started at the WHM as her assistant, and was fortunate to make a connection with her that surpassed that of professional colleagues. Nancy gave sound and well-reasoned advice when it came to important life decisions, and was a caring, supportive friend. I trusted her counsel, valued her friendship and thoughtfulness, and am extremely grateful to have known her. She is missed more than she could ever know and I am hopeful that her family finds peace during this challenging time.

You are invited to share your memories of Nancy by emailing Sarah at sarah@williamstownhistoricalmuseum.org.

These memories will be compiled and shared with Nancy's family.

History Book Group

**Regular meeting time
first Thursday of each month, 1 p.m.
at the WHM**

You are invited to join a History Book Group! The current book is *John Adams* by Pulitzer Prize winner David McCullough. All are invited to join the group at the next meeting, scheduled for Thursday, March 1, 2018, at 1 p.m. at the WHM, where the third section of the book will be discussed. Please feel free to attend even if you have not yet read the book. If you have questions, please contact Sarah at: sarah@williamstownhistoricalmuseum.org.



Recent Acquisition

The museum was fortunate to receive the popcorn machine pictured here in October 2017 from Pete King, grandson of Clarence and Irene King, proprietors of the Walden Theatre on Spring Street. As Mr. King notes, "Many theatre goers during the '40s, '50s, '60s and '70s will surely remember this unique piece of Spring St. history." Agreed. Thanks, Pete!



Sarah Currie is pictured at left with one of Pine Cobble's third graders during a class visit to the WHM on January 24, 2018. The students worked on a local history project investigating topics that included Sand Springs, Pine Cobble, and the Hopkins Observatory. After carrying out research, students enjoyed free time exploring the museum and playing in the Children's Discovery Room. Reflections from the third graders: "I loved playing in the classroom with all my friends." "The classroom was fun because it looked like a real old-time classroom." "I really hope to come back again. I loved it so much."



History Makers Met in the Fall

**1967 Mount Greylock Regional High School Intercounty Championship Football Team Members
50th Year Reunion at The Log, October 13, 2017**

Lower Row (L-R) Pete King, Jim Hamilton, Bill Clark, Dave Field, John Agostini, Tom Roy, Fritz Phelps, Gary Rougeau, Coach John Allen, Jim Geary, Jon Bushnell, Dick Cummings, and Shawn Kelly.

Upper Row (L-R) Steve Wooster, Dick Quinn, Jim Flaherty, Gary Dow, Bill Prendergast, Mike McCarthy, and Mike Pomerleau

Thanks to the Allen family for use of the photo. Photo courtesy of Pete King.

Williamstown Historical Museum

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This Mitchell school class photo from 1955-1956 came from Margaret Lindley via the Toureille family. Could you help us identify the members of the class? Here is the information we have: First Row: third girl from right, Diane Budz. Second Row: Judy Beland (not sure which student). Third row: Third boy from right, Tom Gillooly. Back row: Alicia ?, Jim Galusha, Marc LaPlante. Please email or call with answers:

sarah@williamstownhistoricalmuseum.org or 413-458-2160