

Making History Every Day

November and December, 2022, Volume 4, Issue 6

Oxford Historical Society, a 501 (c) 3 charitable organization

Twitchell Rowland Homestead Museum

P.O. Box 582, 60 Towner Lane, Oxford, CT 06478

“Charcoal Burners” program

Open to the Public / Free

Sunday, November 20, 2022 * 2 pm

Riverside Firehouse, Freeman Rd.

Election of Board Members - **See Profiles on Page 4*

The Oxford Historical Society is pleased to host local historians Peter and Barbara Rzasa for another look into local history. Their **Charcoal Burners** is a PowerPoint presentation describing the Oxford charcoal hearths and charcoal production. Learn who built the old hearths, what the charcoal was used for and how charcoal hearths can be found today.

The free event is Sunday, November 20 at 2 pm at the Riverside Fire House on Freeman Road, Oxford. There will be a short business meeting following the program. No registration is required and refreshments will be served. For further information contact Nancy Farnum at 203 888-0230.

While walking along many of the trails in Oxford, hikers occasionally come across large raised circular mounds that appear odd and out of place. These 40-foot wide circles are the remains of charcoal hearths on which colliers burned logs to create charcoal used to power the Lower Naugatuck Valley's steel, copper and brass industries in the nineteenth century.



Image from Library of Congress, Historical American Buildings Survey, print borrowed from New Jersey Department on Conservation and Development, Charcoal Pit Prior to Burning, Lakehurst, NJ.

At that time, Oxford's forests would have looked far different after hills were stripped of trees and wood piled to make charcoal. Colliers would arrange the cut wood into particular patterns up to fifteen feet tall, cover the logs with leaves and dirt and then set fire to the mound so that the wood would bake. After ten to fourteen days, the resultant charcoal was raked out, cooled and transported by ox carts along charcoal roads to industrial buyers. Charcoal production became a major segment of Oxford's forest products industry.

The remains of at least 150 old charcoal hearths have recently been located at Oxford's Jackson Cove Park and the Rockhouse Hill Sanctuary, Kettletown State Park and Naugatuck State Forest. Each hearth contains small remnants of 100 – 150 year old charcoal.



Barbara and Peter Rzasa are local historians and nature photographers who provide presentations on such subjects as 19th century lime kilns and lime production, and the Old Woodbury Path: The Historic Transportation Route From Woodbury to Derby. They have presented several programs on these and other hidden histories of the Lower Naugatuck Valley.

Barbara obtained a B.S. degree in art from Southern Connecticut State University and is a retired graphic designer who uses her artistic skills to create nature-based watercolor paintings. Peter earned his B.S. degree in Forest Chemistry from S.U.N.Y. College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

Heritage Recipe - Succotash

From the Miles Family of Oxford, circa 1921-1959

J. Edward and Susannah Williams Miles moved their large family of eleven children (7 boys, 4 girls) in the late summer of 1921 from a home in Seymour with electricity and indoor plumbing to a large farmhouse on Chestnut Tree Hill in Oxford that had no electricity and no indoor plumbing.

According to family history, J. Edward purchased the house because he did not want his older sons hanging around Main Street in Seymour. He felt the boys would be very helpful to him as he started and operated a farm that included milking cows and tending pigs, chickens, vegetable gardens and a strawberry patch.

Susannah was not aware her husband was buying the farmhouse until the sale was finalized! She was expecting her 12th child when they moved. Working so hard to settle her family in the new home, Susannah delivered her baby, a boy, two months early. He was very small but healthy; the story is that he was placed in a shoebox behind the kitchen wood stove to keep him warm (a precursor to today's incubator, maybe).

After the Depression and beyond, J. Edward took a job in a factory in Bridgeport during the week to help support the family, leaving much of the farm chores to his sons. On the weekends he continued to tend his vegetable garden and egg laying chickens. Susannah had two more children, numbers 13 and 14, in 1922 and 1924, both boys, the family now totaling 10 boys and four girls.

The last child was born at home and delivered by his father, J. Edward. A large snowstorm was raging that day (3/12/24) so the doctor was unable to come up Chestnut Tree Hill by horse and buggy; however, he spoke with J. Edward on the phone, instructing him on how to assist his wife giving birth. An older daughter also helped by boiling scissors to cut the cord and get-

ting clean linens and other items as needed. Family history also recalls that although Susannah could have had more children for another five years after the 14th arrived, no more were born after J. Edward had to deliver the last one!

Life on the farm was busy with Susannah preparing the meals, including the succotash recipe below. Often four pies were made and eaten for dessert in one meal. Two of the youngest girls helped care for the younger boys as well as sweeping floors, ironing, and washing dishes.

A number of the younger children attended grammar school in the one room school house just down road from their home on Chestnut Tree Hill. The older siblings rode bicycles to Abe Deveau's garage on Route 67 to get the school bus to Seymour High School.



District No. 3 Chestnut Tree Hill School.

As the family got older, some of the children began to marry and have their own children. Sundays found everyone gathering at the homestead for supper. Susannah played the piano (by ear, no formal lessons) beautifully so the house was often filled with song and music.

During World War II five sons and one son-in-law (OHS member Jane Hulbert's father), served in the armed forces. Sadly, son Sergeant David Sheldon Miles died on 2/3/43 when the transport ship, the SS Dorchester, headed to Greenland, was torpedoed in the North Atlantic by a German U-boat.

Being the first soldier from Oxford to die in World War II, when the American Legion, Post 147 was organized shortly after the war ended, it was named after him to honor his sacrifice.

Susannah became a Gold Star mother. Susannah, a warm and loving wife, mother and grandmother, died on Mother's Day in 1949 at the age of 69. After her death, J. Edward sold the farmhouse but remained there in an upstairs apartment, still tending his chickens and the strawberry and asparagus patches until his passing in 1959 at the age of 79.

(Continues on page 3)



Miles family home at 278 Chestnut Tree Hill Road

Miles family Heritage Recipe, Continued.

All fourteen children have now passed on: Harrison Edward, Eleanor Williams, John Howard, Harriet Eloise, Donald Roy, David Sheldon, Rees Emerson, Marion Corrine, Richard Harpin, Frances Adele, Edward Upson, Robert Newsom, Franklin Russell, and Horace Wilson.

A member of the OHS Executive Committee, Jane Hulbert as well as her sister and member Marcia Wrogg, are daughters of the late Frances Miles Samoker, one of the fourteen children of J. Edward and Susannah Williams Miles.

Heritage Recipe: *Succotash*

4 ounces of bacon, diced, browned
2-3 quarts of water, low boil
8-10 ears of corn, kernels removed
1 ½ cups of lima beans, fresh or frozen
½ stick of butter

Boil corn cobs in water for 20 minutes. Remove cobs, add corn kernels and lima beans and salt and pepper, boil 15 minutes. Add the browned bacon plus butter and a little milk to taste (optional). Enjoy!



GIVING TUESDAY

November
29th

Thanks to amazing community and foundation support, great progress was made moving, repairing and restoring the 1850's Mr. Munn's one room school house. Now our fund-raising and work will concentrate on obtaining supplies to give our student guests an authentic experience of an 1850's school day. We'll use **Giving Tuesday** donations to buy McGuffey Readers, slates, quill pens, and other early school supplies necessary to host a class in our "new" facility.

From
this



to
this



Your online donations will enable us to welcome students at the schoolhouse and homestead for **A Day in 1850**. Please support the Historical Society on Giving Tuesday, November 29 online (oxford-historical-society.org), @oxfordhistorical on facebook or by mail to Oxford Historical Society, Inc., PO Box 582, Oxford, CT 06478

CORRECTION

In our previous issue, the Heritage Recipe listed a daughter among the cooks in John Down's family. Mr. Downs does not have a daughter. Also, a photo of John Downs, Jr. in a car was misidentified as his father, John Downs, Sr. It is John Downs, Sr. who is known as the Mayor of Riverside. The author of the article apologizes for the errors.

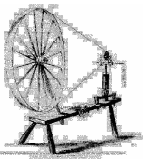


SAVE THE DATE:

April 2023 *

6th Annual Fiber Fest

Saturday, April 15, 10 am - 4 pm
& Sunday, April 16, noon - 4 pm



Free Admission: all ages are welcome to walk the grounds. See locally raised live animals on display and watch sheep shearing!

Try your hand at various fiber crafts from spinning to weaving. Explore the 1755 Twitchell Rowland Homestead. Over a dozen fiber crafters from around the state will share their skills and offer products for sale. Snacks will be available.

Neighborly News -

FOLIO* Election Book & Bake Sale

Saturday, Nov. 5, 9 am - 3 pm

Monday, Nov. 7, 9 am - 4 pm

Tuesday, Nov. 6 * ELECTION DAY * 9 am - 7 pm

Books are priced variously by days with bargains every day. Homemade baked goods will be on offer for a special treat! All proceeds benefit Oxford Public Library. [*=Friends of the Library in Oxford]

Help Wanted: Love history? Fascinated by old houses? What a great opportunity to share your passion by becoming a docent at The Homestead. We will give you training and you can share the fun with other volunteers. You do not need to be a member to qualify. For more information contact: Nancy Farnum 203-888-0230.

ON DISPLAY- Family Treasures

In a local version of *Antiques Roadshow*, members of the Oxford Historical Society have filled the society display cases with treasured items from their families including descriptions of how the items were acquired, what they are and what purpose they served.

See china, household gadgets, dolls and toys, collectibles and various other fascinating memorabilia from history.

The displays are open to the public on the first and third Sundays each month, from 2-4 pm during the society's Open House events.

Look for the docents, drop in and experience Oxford's living history. The 1755 Twitchell-Rowland Homestead was saved from destruction and relocated to its current site at 60 Towner Lane thanks to community support of a historic level. Pictures of the historic house move and regular monthly displays of Oxford life and living are featured.



House Signs for Sale They Make a Great Holiday Gift!

The Oxford Historical Society is offering locally made signs for mounting on house exteriors, 11 inches by 18 inches on painted board with pre-drilled holes for easy mounting. You choose 2 lines of text. For information and orders contact Marilyn Stebar 203-888-3469.

Looking for Holiday Gift Ideas?



Pen and Ink
Drawings
by
Claudia Farkas



Homestead Open Houses

The regular schedule of first and third Sundays from 2 - 4 pm is November 6, December 4 and 18. The November 20 date is a free program at the Riverside Firehouse on Freeman Road. [see page 1]

Books on Oxford are on sale, plus photo notecards and T-shirts supporting the ongoing maintenance of the Homestead and Society activities. The notecard sets include multiple photo notes of the Stevenson Dam construction; photo notes of old Oxford and the new architectural series of local homes by society member and artist Claudia Farkas. Books produced by the society include the *Historic Buildings of Oxford, Past and Present*; *Railroad in Oxford*; *World War II part 2* and other titles of note.

EXECUTIVE BOARD NOMINEES: Familiar Faces, New Positions.

President - Rob Buck stepped into the gap left when previous President Louise Burr passed away at the age of 90. He is a Southbury resident, a member of the Oxford United Church of Christ Congregational and the past President of the Oxford Grange. Rob is a man of many interests and most of them center on history – both local and general. And of course, he collects things – all sorts of historically flavored things. Items from his collections have been on display at the society often.

First Vice President - Eleanor Sturges resides in Sandy Hook but grew up in Oxford attending local schools. Her sister was the late Louise Burr, former President of the OHS. Ellie has been a member of the Oxford Historical Society for years and supports society activities with enthusiasm. She is an avid square dancer.

Second Vice President – Elizabeth (Bo) Duncan is a retired educator, having spent years on a Native American reservation in Minnesota. Over the past five years, she returned to her hometown of Oxford and helped build her own home with the support of many local craftsmen. Second Vice President includes the responsibilities for preservation of the society's properties.

Recording Secretary – Christine Lesko has resided in Oxford for decades and comes from a family with ties to area towns as well as roots in Maine. Chris also supports the Stratford Historical Society as a volunteer docent.

Corresponding Secretary – Barbara Robinson has lived in Oxford for decades and has participated in many local non-profit activities included supporting St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church. She works with the Membership Committee.

Treasurer – Elspeth (Essie) Lydon has lived in Oxford for over four decades and is a retired library director.

Historian – Nancy Farnum, well known retired Oxford elementary school librarian, met almost all the children of school age in her tenure. She enjoys her historic house and is happiest sharing local history.

All of these Executive Board positions are voluntary and anyone interested in knowing more about responsibilities or participating should contact Nancy Farnum (203-888-230) or Rob Buck.