



THE AVON HISTORICAL SOCIETY SPRING 2015 NEWSLETTER

Spring is here! Old man winter is finally history. We are once again greeted with leaf buds on the trees, the trills of songbirds and sunshine on our faces. Its time to get outdoors and enjoy this wonderful community of ours and perhaps take in some of the events listed below. We look forward to seeing you again this year as we welcome Spring!



HEAR YE, HEAR YE-UPCOMING EVENTS



**Presentation held in the Alsop Community Room of the Avon Free Public Library.

****Saturday, May 2, 1:00 p.m.**—"The History of our Nation Set in Stone: Arlington National Cemetery" presented by Carolyn Ivanoff, historian and educator, will take us on a virtual tour of the cemetery from Civil War to present.

Saturday, May 2, 9:30 a.m.—5:00 p.m.—"Historic Taverns & Tastings" bus tour with Historic Sites of Connecticut's Farmington Valley. Visit three historic taverns in the Valley with colonial music, dance, food and demonstrations. \$45 per person, includes bus, lunch and tastings. Reservations at: 860-676-8878 or www.fvva.com

****Saturday, May 9, 1:00 p.m.**—"Memorializing a Generations Service: Connecticut Civil War Monuments" will be presented by Prof. Matthew Warshauer, CCSU and co-chair of the CT Civil War Commission. A reception will follow this event as we close the Avon Commemoration of the Civil War.

****Wednesday, May 27, 2:00 p.m.**—"Tobacco Sheds: Vanishing Treasures in the Connecticut River Valley" presented by authors Dale and Darcy Cahills who have published two books on the subject. This is a co-sponsored event with the Avon Free Public Library. The Cahills spent 10 years photographing tobacco sheds and conducting oral histories of people who worked tobacco over the years. Books will be for sale as well as framed prints, stationery and framed tobacco leaves!

May 15—August 31—The Gildo T. Consolini Avon VFW Post 3272 will present a summer long exhibit and events commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII in several areas of the Avon Free Public Library. In addition will be an exhibit celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Post along with the biographies of the founders, as well as all Avon veterans who served in WWII.

Sunday, June 7, 2:00 p.m.—Birthday Party for the 1865 Pine Grove School House, 3 Harris Road! Join us as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the school house complete with cake, balloons and special guests. The school house will be open to visitors on Sundays from 2:00—4:00p.m. through September.

Sunday, June 14, 2:00 p.m.—Opening day for the 1810 Derrin House, 249 West Avon Road. Visit the Derrin House to see the ongoing renovations to date. The House will be open to visitors on Sundays from 2:00-4:00 p.m. through September.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE...

The c. 1880 Horse Guards Barn has a new roof!



Barn roof under construction from the sky!



Barn roof completed and ventilator painted!

The roof of the c. 1880 Horse Guards Barn has been replaced! As you may know, the members of the Society agreed to accept a long term lease on the Barn from the Connecticut Military Department in 2011. Since that time, very generous donors from the public and some family trusts and private foundations, as well as two barn grants from the CT Trust for Historic Preservation, have provided the necessary funding to provide not only the new roof, but a structural engineering study, removal of the 1954 annex that fell due to the snow this winter, and removal and replacement of the south and rear walls. All this could not have been done without the foresight, tenacity and hours and hours of work by several Society members and Trustees including Liz Neff, Peter Wright, and Len Tolisano. Included are the many companies that have donated time, labor and materials at either cost, or no cost, over the past four years including Sanford & Hawley, Maher's Paint & Wallpaper, Paine's Inc., Walker Crane & Rigging Corporation, Cyr Construction, Royal Construction Company, Wiley Swain General Carpentry LLC; AIC Program of the State of Connecticut and the Town of Avon Public Works Department. Financial donors include: Margaret Corie Darby Foundation, William Yandow Charitable Trust, Millers Foods, dozens of local and state residents and the hundreds who purchased Cow Chip Raffle tickets. And thanks to Deb Key Imagery, Michael Go and Alex Sauerbrunn for aerial, still and video photography of the process. As we go to press, the south and back walls are being replaced. This will complete most of the exterior work that needs to be done on the structure. **THANKS TO EVERYONE FOR MAKING THIS PROJECT POSSIBLE!!**

Welcome to the new Society Board of Trustees!

At the Annual Members Meeting on April 9, 2015, the new Board of Trustees was installed. The full list is on the last page of this newsletter. Those present for the meeting are pictured here.



L-R: Liz Neff, Sebastian Saraceno, Terri Wilson, Len Tolisano, Helaine Bertsch, Peter Wright, Ben Isaacson, Carolyn McGrattan, Mary Harrop and Deborah Key

THE HISTORY CORNER...

The Oldest House Standing in 'Avon Center' with a Special History Connection



The historic house located at 26 W. Main Street has been known by many names over its 200 plus year history. It was a private residence for many years until the 1960s when it was sold as commercial real estate. But what is it about this former home/business building that has a special meaning to the Town? First, a little background history will set the stage. According to the Town of Avon's 1997 Architectural Survey, the original house dates to c. 1780-1785. It was then a one and a half story, saltbox dwelling with a center chimney. In 'Avon, Connecticut-An Historical Story' by Fran Mackie is the following quotation. "In the last two decades

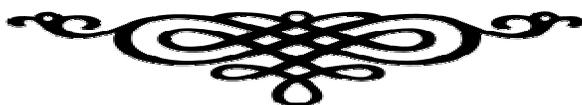
of the 18th century, Joel Wheeler of Woodbridge [New Haven] purchased more than 100 acres of land, the mills and at least one dwelling house built about 1780 (now 26 West Main Street) and is said to have owned most of the land in what is now called 'Avon Center.'" Joel Wheeler gave the land on which the Avon Congregational Church is built and was a founding member of the Church. Mr. Wheeler passed on in 1829 and there is a gap in ownership between 1830 and the early 1850s buried in Town land records. The next owners listed on both the 1855 and 1869 maps of Avon were Evelyn and his wife, Emma Wheeler Woodford. The Woodford family dates back to the early Northington days.

Now for the special connection that gives this house a double shot of history. The subsequent owners were Walter L. and Fannie Wheeler Hunter. Fannie was the great granddaughter of Joel Wheeler and she was the daughter of Ralph L. and Carolyn "Carrie" Mary Case Wheeler. Wait for it..... Walter and Fannie were the parents of Austin R. and Charles W. Hunter. Wait. Austin married Marian McNamee [Hunter], the very same lady for whom our Town's local history room at the Avon Free Public Library is named! Ta da. Mrs. Hunter worked at the first Avon Library on Main Street across the street and just east of their home for many years-a short commute indeed! Austin had lived in the historic home from about 1915 until about 1960 when the house began to be taxed as commercial property. Marian continued to work for the Avon Library in its new location on Country Club Road for many more years. One may wonder why she was given the honor of having our Town's history room named for her. The answer is because she was passionate about preserving Avon's history as evidenced by her having served as both Church and Town Historian. And we, the residents of Avon, are all the more culturally enriched because of her foresight.

The house in 1971 became the business of 'I and Thou' bookstore and coffee shop. In the late 70s, the next business to occupy the former home was the Yield House furniture store shown in the photograph above. They were in business for just over ten years. The building sat vacant for a time until 1994 when it was purchased to become the restaurant we know today, the First and Last Tavern.

Every house has a story to tell. Some, because of their age, have longer stories than others. This house, now business, still retains its' visual historic character and 'communicates' with the few other remaining historic homes nearby to give us a peek into the past of what 'Avon Center' looked like in bygone days. The house was a part of a farm and there is still a barn attached to the structure harking back to Avon's agrarian past. It was built in the early days of the Republic, now the United States of America. It was there during the days of the Farmington Canal, literally a stone's throw away. The house was there through the Civil War years, the Victorian age, World Wars I and II, and other events in history right up to the present day. Imagine, if the window panes on the house were eyes looking out onto Main Street, the changes the house 'witnessed' in Avon during its two centuries plus!

As we pass by this grand old lady of a home today, let us remember her heritage, and hope the wrecking ball never finds its way to her front door as so often happens to 'old' homes. It is our responsibility as caretakers of Avon's collective historical past, to be stewards for the preservation of this and other homes as they have important stories to tell. Because that is how Marian Hunter would want it.



DID YOU KNOW?

The Special Projects Committee of the Avon Historical Society has been engaged in six school exhibits/displays for the 2014-2015 school year. Here is a summary of the exhibits:



Avon High School Fall 2014 – Two large glass display cases in the Gallery contained exhibits on related topics. One was designed as a welcome to the Chinese educators to the Avon Public Schools who are bringing Chinese language and culture



to our public school children. The second case featured the life of Yung Wing, a former Avon resident, who was the first Chinese educated at Yale and the founder of the American Missionary Association.

Thompson Brook School Nov/Dec. 2014 – A large bulletin board in the Gallery featured the former West Avon milling community of 'Sleepy Hollow' that was located where the Avon Old Farms School is today. This project highlighted the early residents of that area as well as the importance of gristmills, carding mills, fulling mills and turning mills to the community.

Thompson Brook School January 2015 – 'The History of the Towpath School Cupola' in the large, nine pane glass display model of the cupola along graphs as well as modern been preserved, repainted, Avon Board of Education



case in the Gallery featured a scale with historic newspaper articles, photo-day photographs. The real cupola has and placed on the front lawn of the building at 25 Simsbury Road.

Pine Grove Elementary School February 2015 – 'How the Farmington Canal Affected Avon's Economy' was depicted in a glass display case to inform students about all the goods that were imported and exported through Avon that made the town a center of trade between 1828 and 1836. In addition, a costumed in-person presentation was done using a 'show and tell' format to educate students about the importance of the canal in Avon's history and its connection to American Presidents (in honor of President's Day).



Roaring Brook Elementary School April 2015 – 'Stone Walls – More Than Meets the Eye' will



be a visual scavenger hunt design between a bulletin board and a nearby glass display case. The glass case will have a pastoral scene of a girl on a tree swing with a stone wall behind her. There will be numbers along the wall corresponding to aspects about the wall, plant life, and animal

life. Students will refer to the bulletin board where the number will be associated with a photo/drawing of the various items pertaining to the area in and around the stone wall. Roaring Brook School is located on the former Reuben Hawley farm whose house, still extant, dates to 1773. A grant from the Avon Education Foundation dovetails with this exhibit by funding educational flip books for the Blazer's Trail Outdoor Learning Classroom.

SPOTLIGHT ON...



We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the volunteers who contribute their time and talents to refurbishing and restoring the Derrin Farmhouse. When the Avon Historical Society got the lease on the house back in 1984 from the State, it was in sorry shape. Over the many ensuing years, the farm-



house has undergone extensive work to bring it back to a condition where it can be visited. There are still many more projects to be done and, as with any labor of love, these things take time, money, and hard work.

The Derrin Farmhouse holds its rightful place in the history of Avon as it was in the hands of the Derrin family for well over 100 years. Today it is one of the last remaining examples of a typical farm-style family home that can be toured during the summer months to see how simple, in terms of possessions, their lives were compared to ours today.

Deserving of special mention for all of his years as the caretaker of the Derrin Farmhouse, is AHS Board member, Leonard Tolisano. He is responsible for overseeing the labor by the AIC, Alternative in the Community folks who satisfied their community service requirements by working at the Derrin Farmhouse. He has also overseen various projects by the Boy Scouts in pursuit of their badge requirements. Another AHS Board member, Peter Wright, has worked with Mr. Tolisano, the AHS Board, and preservation-minded agencies in securing grants to fund repairs to the house.

For the past two years, a newer member of the Board has taken a very personal interest in, and hands on approach to, restoring the farmhouse to one day get it up to museum status. John Forster has toiled doing many jobs at the Derrin Farmhouse including this past Fall helping to strip and refinish the wood plank kitchen floors and scrape paint off the ceiling of the entry room. His efforts have not only enhanced the appearance of the farmhouse, but have helped to rejuvenate the spirit of the house. In the future, John hopes to see silhouettes on the walls representing the family members that lived there as well as some documents and manuscripts to personalize the home. Visitors will get a sense of what it was like living in Avon during our town's early farming days.

Lastly there are many other people who are not afraid to roll up their sleeves, get dirty and sweaty. Whether it was working in the raised garden beds such as Liz Neff did last summer or the efforts of Diane & Marcel Robaczynski working in the off season to bring some of the luster back to this old farmhouse, or the previous work by Barry Chubb for the arduous job of plastering the walls. All these people devoted their time and energy unselfishly because they share something in common... the desire to preserve Avon's past for Avon's future.

The Avon Historical Society is pleased to announce that September 2016 will mark 250 years since John Page of Branford deeded to his daughter Lucy Page, wife of Stephen Darrin [Derrin], 39 acres of land with a 'house and barn thereon standing'. And the rest, as they say, is history! We plan to celebrate this important milestone of the Derrin Farmhouse with a four part lecture series beginning in the Fall of 2015. The speakers, locations and topics will be announced in the AHS Summer newsletter.



'Make New Friends, But Keep the Old'-A Camp Bryant Girl Scout Reunion held at the Avon Senior Center on August 23, 2014

Review written by Jeannie Parker

A highlight at summer's end for many in town and the valley was the re-creation of "A Day at Camp Gertrude Bryant." The event drew several generations of former campers to the Avon Sr. Center. The camp, first established for Girl Scout's in 1944, eventually welcomed all girls and, the last few years of its existence, boys from 1st to 4th grade attended. It closed in 1965 after 21 years.

The day was a barrel of fun from beginning to end. "Campers" arrived in their camp clothes with brown bag lunch in hand, ready to re-enter a world from their youth. Memories quickly came to life as they recognized old friends, saw familiar signs for their camp units, viewed exhibits of old photos, checked out history displays and spotted lunch tables featuring mess kits as part of the centerpieces. The latter elicited a smile from those who remembered cooking meals when camping overnight.

These "kids at heart" were noisy and enthusiastic but settled down when the day began with the traditional flag raising, Pledge of Allegiance and singing of "My Country 'Tis of Thee." Representative girls from the Daisy, Brownie, Junior, and Cadette Girl Scouts recited the Girl Scout Promise. The girls included Haley Bertsch, Paige McCracken, Brynn McCracken, Caitlin Mussa and Phoebe Finch and their two scout leaders, Helaine Bertsch and Gina Finch.

A brief history of Camp Gertrude Bryant enlightened the audience. As youngsters, most were unaware of the origin of the camp's name. A young woman from Avon named Gertrude Bryant died of an illness while serving in the Women's Army Corps (WAC) Motor Pool in Washington, D.C. in 1944. She grew up in Avon and had been a very active Girl Scout, attaining its highest award, the Golden Eaglet. She later became a valued leader. At the end of the first year the camp was dedicated in her memory.

Honored guests included members of the Thomas A. Burnham family. Present were son Peter and his wife Lynda, their son John and grandson Jakob. The Burnhams generously allowed the scouts to build the girls' camp on their property. In the 60s, they sold the land to Avon for the new Avon High School. However, the camp was allowed to remain in session for several more years. The Burnhams also donated the land on the west side of the road for the West Avon Community Club and the little fire station which still stands today. Their generosity provided the community with property for facilities for a social center which local folks enjoyed from the 20s through the 90s.

Other special guests recognized included a former Girl Scout leader, Dottie St. Pierre, who was Gertrude Bryant's close friend; Bev Selberg Benson, camp counselor and assistant director for many years; Ernie Rettig, former president of the Avon Lions Club which supported the camp; his wife Barbara, a member of the Avon Women's Club, longtime sponsors of the local Girl Scouts; Ethel Kotarba, parent representative whose daughter and a son attended the camp during its heyday, and finally, members of the Avon Historical Society who recorded the event by taking photos and conducting interviews. Katie Power Ruez, former director in 1949 and 1950, joined the festivities later in the day. Midge Smith, who now lives in NC, was unable to attend. She held the prize as director with the longest tenure – 10 years! Many campers and counselors were disappointed not to reconnect with her.

The ladies (and one very brave man who attended) launched into the day's activities. The old fashioned arts and crafts project tables were alive with campers making beaded necklaces and bracelets, stamping note cards and book-marks, weaving potholders, creating God's eyes and tapping into their memories to draw a large map of the campgrounds. The tables were alive with laughter and stories of day and overnight camping, swimming in the cold, spring fed Community Club Pool, sleeping overnight in the tents or on the ground around the flagpole, learning camp craft skills and working on Girl Scout badges, nature study, sports and more.

The tales continued throughout lunch time as each memory sparked another. The memorabilia including Girl Scout merit badge sashes, pins and uniforms from Brownies and Girl Scouts served as spring boards for conversation. The arts and crafts that were saved and treasured over the years were dusted off and put on display much to the delight of the campers. Following lunch, everyone gathered around the indoor 'campfire' to sing songs, relate more stories of camp experiences, enjoy some relay races, snack on s'mores and enjoy the camaraderie.

The day ended, just as it did when Camp Gertrude Bryant existed, with the lowering and proper folding of the flag and singing of "Taps". It was obvious the Girl Scout round "Make New Friends but Keep the Old" was taken to heart by all who attended that day.



Image designed by Juliette Low, source Wikipedia



The Continuing Adventures of Abigail Fieldmouse

Spring 2015



Finally! The long, snowy and cold winter was over and Springtime had come to Avon. Abigail, the little brown mouse who lived under the floorboards of the Pine Grove School house was looking forward to letting some fresh air into her home and doing some spring cleaning.

First she took a scarf to tie up her ears to keep her fur dust free. Then she put on her little pink calico apron. The first chore was to clean out all the ashes from the pot-belly stove that kept her warm all winter long. She scooped them out into a bucket, and then took them outside to spread in the garden. They would be good for the new plants. Some of the ashes she saved for when she would be making a batch of homemade soap outside in a big kettle.

Next Abigail decided to take her bed quilt and delicate linens over to the water spring that ran behind the farm across the road. She brought along some suds and off she went. She soaped up the quilt and then laid it at the water's edge to gently scrub with a brush. When she was all done, she found she didn't have the strength to pull the heavy, wet quilt up the shore. Oh my! So Abigail went in search of some friends who could come help.

She found Benjamin Bunny who now had a family of sixteen bunny kids. They all came to the spring and with all of their many teeth and muscles, were able to pull the quilt ashore to dry in the warm sunshine. To thank them for helping, Abigail invited Benjamin, his wife Pooky, and the children back to her home at the school house for some homemade carrot cookies and dandelion tea. After their snack, the bunny children played in the school yard as the school children were not there that day because it was a Sunday.

One of the bunny children named Orville, was a little bit too adventurous for his own good. He wandered away from the others exploring around the school house and he found trouble. The cover on the old water well was slightly off-center, just enough space for a small bunny to fall through. Ker-splash! Bunnies can't swim for long but luckily there were only a few inches of water in the well. Orville was terrified and began crying for his mother. At about the same time, everyone else realized that Orville was missing and started searching for him around the school yard. Then, as they got in the general area, Abigail with her keen sense of hearing immediately zeroed in on where the cries were coming from. She found Orville at the bottom of the well. Now the question was...how to get him out?

Abigail had an idea! She would take all of her bed linens and table cloths and tie them together, then lower them into the well. It worked! Orville was pulled up out of the well with the help of his parents, siblings and Abigail all pulling on the fabric rope. He was wet but unharmed and his mother gave him a big kiss after scolding him for venturing off on his own without letting a parent know.

Soon the bunny family bid Abigail good-bye as they needed to head back to their bunny hole to get ready for supper and bedtime. Abigail stayed outside for a little while longer, looking out across the field and admiring the sunset over the trees at Sunrise Farm. The lilacs near the school house were in bloom and the air was once again sweet with the fragrances of Springtime in Avon.

Sneak Peek: In the Summer issue, join Abigail on her next adventure visiting Hartford!





An Avon Garden with Historic Inspiration



One of our town residents loves being outdoors and what more rewarding way to spend some time than getting back to one's roots...or perhaps one's rhizomes! Marilyn has been a gardener for over 35 years. Being the daughter of a military family that moved often, she was able to explore some of our nation's historic and most prestigious estates and gardens, many in the mid-Atlantic region. She speaks proudly of having been inspired by the gardens at Middleton Place plantation in South Carolina, The Biltmore Estate in North Carolina, the Custis-Lee Mansion in Arlington, Virginia, of Mount Vernon near Alexandria, Virginia, and Thomas Jefferson's 'Monticello' in Charlottesville, Virginia. What impressed her most about those gardens were the magnificent colors of the flowers, trees and shrubs.

Marilyn's interest in gardening started because of her desire "to make things pretty." She takes an active part in her neighborhood's landscape committee working to beautify focal points such as the entrances to maintain Avon's image. Beyond this, it was apparent from speaking with Marilyn that she takes pride in her own piece of this Earth-a, triangular-shaped garden bed with pathways and a 175 ft. stonewall on one side and nestled against a very green golf course. This garden has the added challenge of being a shade garden as it sits beneath tall oak trees. Marilyn's years of reading gardening books and her personal experience overcame the obstacle of the lack of adequate sunshine by carefully selecting her plants. Her garden consists of shade-loving plants such as Hostas, shrubs such as Rhododendrons, Mountain Laurel (our State flower) and Hydrangeas. For some visual height, she planted the summer flowering Kousa dogwood tree. Her perennials include ferns [a rhizome], Daffodils, Geranium varieties that don't require much sunlight, Solomon's Seal, Ligularia, and colorful Day Lilies. She finds that New Guinea Impatiens, an annual, are a more shade tolerant variety and their colorful blooms with its characteristic stripe add a special touch.

As Marilyn spoke about her garden, it was what she didn't say that came through-her garden brings her satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, a feeling of joy among her blooms. But most of all, she has made her garden pretty because that's how she likes it to be!

EXTRA! EXTRA! [Read All About It...History Newsletter Just for Kids!](#)



If you are a regular reader of our newsletter, you may have noticed that the 'Kid's Page' with word search, unscramble words, coloring picture, riddles, etc. has been missing from the last two issues. The reason for this has been due to space limitations. Since we at the Avon Historical Society want to reach out to ALL of our citizens and bring something of historical interest to everyone, it has been decided that we will have two newsletters-an adult version and a children's version.

The kid's newsletter will be sent out electronically through the Avon Public School system's 'Virtual Backpack' so it will go to Roaring Brook, Thompson Brook, and Pine Grove School students. The newsletter will be two pages, double-sided so four pages total and have some of the same things the old 'Kid's Page' did and, of course, will feature the 'Continuing Adventures of Abigail Fieldmouse' stories. In addition there will be a [Pet Story](#) section, featuring Avon resident's pets, a 'History Corner' story, [Where Is It?](#) a photo from Avon to identify, and [History Challenge Questions](#) to see how much you know about Avon and it's past. We hope you really like it!

Avon Historical Society

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The Mission of the Avon Historical Society, founded in 1974, is to identify, collect, preserve, utilize, publish, display and promote the history and heritage of Avon.

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