



Winter 2019

## Happy 45<sup>th</sup> Birthday Avon Historical Society!

On January 2, 1974 a group of civic and historic-minded citizens took the bold step to form the Avon Historical Society, electing Mr. George Leger as its first President. That time in our nation's history was the lead up to the United States Bicentennial in 1976 and everyone was getting excited about American history. Small towns like Avon took advantage of this national movement and jumped on board.

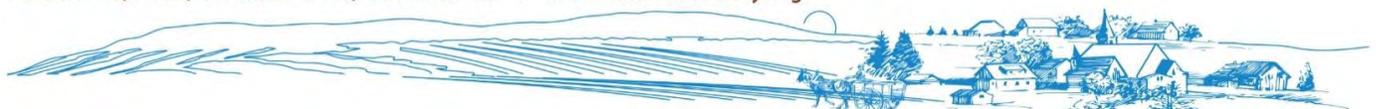
According to the Society's first newsletter in 1974, the first order of business was to provide a bulletin board at Avon High School to list events. Our Town Historian Nora Howard, then college student Nora Oakes, began recording stories from local residents. On a larger scale the Society worked with the Town of Avon to sign a 99-year lease to restore and operate the 1865 Pine Grove School House which opened officially during the Bicentennial year of 1976 thanks to a \$2,700 matching grant from the State Bicentennial Commission. Shortly thereafter the schoolhouse, and five homes surrounding it, were listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the only national register district in Avon to date! In 1980 another 99-year lease was signed with the Town to relocate School House No. 3 from Country Club Road to its current location on East Main Street (Route 44) so the new Avon Free Public Library could be built in what is the geographic center of Avon. It took three years before it was fully restored and opened as the Avon Living Museum in 1983. A 30-year lease on the Derrin House on West Avon Road was signed with the First Company Governor's Horse Guards in 1996. It was amended and extended to include the Horse Guard Barn in 2011.

In order to raise the money necessary to keep the Society going and growing there have been several multi-year fundraisers for the Society such as Antique Shows (1981-1990), Vintage Clothing Sales (1986-1988), Miniature Shows (1999-2003), Cow Chip Raffles (2008-2012), and now we are about to have the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual Tablescape showcase event on March 22 and 23, 2019 (see page 5).

Several books about our town's history have been published including *A is for Avon* in 1979 & again in 2009 and *Avon, Connecticut...an historical story* in 1988. More than a decade later several photo books on Avon's history by Town Historian Nora Howard in 2000 and Society member Peter Wright in 2010 were published. In addition the longest known diary of a colonial minister was transcribed by Nora Howard and published as *Catch'd on Fire: The Journals of Rufus Hawley, Avon, Connecticut* in 2011. A large survey of historical architecture was done in 1997 by the former CT Historic Commission which is the basis for much research on historic properties. And for the Society's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1999, the members enjoyed a garden party at the home of John and Chrissie D'Esopo.

In addition, the Society organized and mounted dozens of exhibits, historic presentations, book talks and events that feature local and national topics both alone and in partnership with the Avon Free Public Library, Avon Senior Center and others. When it comes to collaboration, the Avon Historical Society has always been there and will continue to be there as we look forward to our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2024!

PO Box 448, Avon, CT 06001-0448, 860.678.7621 • [avonhistoricalsociety.org](http://avonhistoricalsociety.org)



## **Pine Grove Schoolhouse saw a busy summer season; thank you to the greeters!**



The Pine Grove Schoolhouse, built in 1865 as Schoolhouse No. 7 and still standing in its original location had a busy summer with more than 140 visitors on 18 Sundays from 2-4pm June through September. There was a high of 28 visitors on August 26 and a low of 1 visitor on July 1, which happened to be a 100° day! Thanks to the following greeters who volunteered their time to meet our guests: Eileen Riley, Norm Sondheimer, Mary Harrop, Ruth Woodford, Anita & Mike Marcotte, Tessa Robertson, Brian Malone, Helaine Bertsch, Adriane Mosley and Ben Isaacson, the coordinator of the building. Ben also created a "scavenger hunt" list of items in the schoolhouse for children to find which engaged them for longer periods of time and gave the greeters a chance to talk about early education in Avon. It was a huge success!

### **While we are offering thanks....**

We thank the members of the Abigail Phelps Chapter, National Society Daughters of the American Revolution in Simsbury for their generous financial donation to the Avon Historical Society for our efforts to keep local history alive in our community and the Valley. At the Chapter's 125<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration on November 11, 2018, they presented several donations to local groups that fulfill their objectives of "Historic Preservation, Education and Patriotism."

And we thank the members of the Garden Club of Avon for a second financial donation to the Avon Historical Society in honor of the presentation given to them in November by Society member, Janet M. Conner, entitled "Colonial Garden Plants of Early Avon and Using Flowers to Teach History."

Lastly, the Society especially thanks various businesses in town that displayed our "Moments in Avon's History" banners for the public to enjoy during the past 18 months. They are: Avon Town Hall, Avon Board of Education, The North House, Avon Old Farms Hotel, Dom's Coffee, the Avon Helen & Harry Gray Cancer Center and Rushford of Avon. Plaques are being presented to them this winter with thanks for their participating in sharing the history of our town with others. The banners are still available for use by contacting the Society at any time. (see the last page for contact information)

### **Avon Historical Society featured in two new books!**

Thanks to the request by their authors, the Avon Historical Society participated in the writing of two new books. The first is *Connecticut 169 Club – Your Passport & Guide to Exploring Connecticut* edited by Martin Podskoch, 2018. Society members wrote the two-page description of our town's history with a listing of sites to see while visiting. The book was recently mentioned by *The Hartford Courant* as one of the best top 5 non-fiction books published in 2018 by a Connecticut author. Marty went to great lengths to have all 169 town stories written by their local historians, members of historical societies or by their prominent citizens. So he refers to all of us as "the authors" of this book. The book is available on Amazon and in stores.

Late this summer a collaborative book entitled *A Tale of Two Meetinghouses and Their Communities, Avon, Connecticut 1746-2019* on the 200-year old history of the West Avon Congregational Church (1818) and Avon Congregational Church (1819) will be published for sale. The Avon Historical Society provided the Introduction as well as assisted in the editing process. There is still time to be a sponsor of the book at the \$50 level which provides a free book with name of individual/company or in honor of someone! To do so, please contact Jennifer Aldag, West Avon Congregational Church, 280 Country Club Road, Avon, CT 06001 or leave a message for Nora Howard at 860-678-0488.

## THE HISTORY CORNER...



items were mostly for home interiors such as staircase spindles, wood tables and chair legs on furniture, and other decorative features.

Woodworking is certainly not something new in our town's history. Back in the early 1800s, the milling community of Sleepy Hollow existed where Avon Old Farms School is located today. Not only did it have the requisite gristmill to supply the grain needs of the community and its environs, there was a sawmill. This water-powered mill could slice planks of lumber from tree trunks for use in buildings such as houses and barns. By the mid-1800s, there is mention in town records [Farmington], of a wood turning shop in the Sleepy Hollow section. This shop could make wagon wheel hubs and also hand-turned wood products on a water-powered lathe. Such

There were, of course, early wood craftsmen and carpenters in our town history that made cabinetry and architectural features still extant on many of our historic homes. In this article, we are going to feature a modern-day wood craftsman who has made some beautiful architectural creations in his own historic home, as well as creative woodworking designs. His name is John D'Esopo, retired professional home builder.

I was particularly captivated by one of the newer adornments to their spectacular garden grounds...an Asian-inspired pergola made by John. What was especially interesting to me was how this pergola creation came into being. John's wife Chrissie said she had seen one like it in a magazine and asked John if he could build it. John didn't even need to work from plans as his life's work has made him a master craftsman. I asked John to walk me through how he went about making this piece. I was anxious to learn as it has both straight lines and large, circular sections that compose the symbol meaning 'good luck'. See photo, courtesy of John.

John told me that the supports were made from pressure-treated wood that was painted in natural tones by his wife Chrissie. The large circles in the center are made of PVC (polyvinyl chloride) which allowed the flexibility to make the curves. John set up a work table, of 8'x8' plywood on sawhorses in his garage, on which to assemble the circular parts of the pergola. He used multiple pieces of PVC that were both glued and screwed together. He had to place 'stops' to keep each piece from moving and clamps to hold the sections together. These circular components were painted as well to compliment the wood sections.

The result is an impressive piece of garden architecture that blends seamlessly into the conifer, shrub, tree, and flower landscape. Some of the evergreens and plantings in the D'Esopo garden are also seen in actual Asian gardens, making the pergola 'feel' right at home. The symbolic pergola sits next to a lovely tool shed, also built by John in the same stylistic design as the carriage-house garage he built. The 3-bay garage, by the way, was also constructed based on a design that Chrissie had seen elsewhere and asked John to build. Simply amazing!

As one drives by the D'Esopo house and garden, you may notice that the tool shed has giant white letters that spell the word 'LOVE' on its roof. One simple word...one powerful message...just "love". And that word sums up this couple-their love of Nature visually abounds both inside and outside their home; their love of community to share their talents-whether gardening or woodworking-with all of us; their love of life.

- By Janet M. Conner



## The Wintertime Adventures of the Abigail Fieldmouse Family

This year in Avon, Connecticut was an especially snowy winter. While this was troublesome for adults, kids-both human and of the mouse variety-thought this was fantastic! Local farm children who attended the Pine Grove one-room schoolhouse had to walk to school and when there was deep snow, school had to be closed. Abigail Fieldmouse and Seamus Graymouse's children had snow days too when the school was not in session.

Once the mouse children had helped mom and dad with their morning chores, they were allowed go outside and play in the snow. Now, this could be quite a challenge when you are only mouse size! After the children were all dressed in their warmest woolen clothing, Abigail gave each of the kids a whistle. The whistle was carved out of a pumpkin seed and if the children found themselves buried in snow, they could blow it for help.

Seamus, their dad, instructed the children to stay close the schoolhouse and each other. He put his only son, Galaxy, in charge of his sisters to watch out for their safety. Off the children went into the new-fallen snow...it was a magical, white, glistening world. The first order of business, of course, was to make mouse angels, just the same as human kids did. This was followed by a good-natured snowball fight with the girls ganging up on Galaxy and bombing him with a barrage of snowballs! They laughed at his face covered in snow with only his black eyes peering out of a ball of white!

Well, now after this frivolity, what do to next? How about a 'mouseman' building contest? The kids broke off into two teams. Moonglow and Stardust were one team; Celestial and Galaxy were the other. The object was to roll up one larger ball for a mouse body, one smaller ball for a mouse head, and two little snowballs for ears in the shortest time. Ready, set, go!!!! Each team scurried to work together to build their mouseman. The team that finished before the shadow cast by the flagpole on the school house touched the oak tree, would win. Each team worked furiously and the team of Moonglow and Stardust finished first! The kids were getting tired and cold but they were having so much fun, they don't want to stop playing. Abigail, dressed in her long Victorian-style wool coat and wearing snowshoes, made from twigs, came walking across the snow to check on the children and bring them hot chocolate. Oh, that tasted SO GOOD and warmed their whiskers. Abigail said they should come in soon.

Galaxy had another idea...mouse catapults! He knew there were dried cattails at the edge of the nearby farm pond. Each of the kids took turns climbing up to the top of a cattail. This bent it near the ground, and with a little extra tension supplied by pulling on a string brought by Galaxy and then let go, each mouse kid sailed through the air and landed in a soft snowbank. Oh boy was this fun until something went a little wrong. Galaxy weighed more than his sisters. When he was launched into the air, he flew faster and then landed more deeply into the snowbank! Oh My! They all knew what to do...they all blew their whistles as hard as they could. Within minutes, as mouse hearing is very good, both Abigail and Seamus fitted into their twig snowshoes found the children. The whole family worked together to dig out Galaxy who was a bit frosted, but unhurt. It was time to go home.

The mouse kids were now safe under the floorboards of the little school house. Their beds felt delightful and they were warm under their handmade, fluffy quilts. It was a wonderful winter day of fun and they learned a good lesson of following their parent's instructions to stay safe. The kids drifted off to sleep hoping to dream of tomorrow's new adventure!

# SAVE THE DATE

# *Tablescape*

*An opportunity to create, display and enjoy table settings*

**FRI MAR 22 + SAT MAR 23, 2019**

10AM-5PM FRI + SAT in the Belle Ballroom at Avon's  
historic **NORTH HOUSE** Rt 44, Avon, CT



*2 day Fundraiser for the AVON HISTORICAL SOCIETY*

**For more information please visit [www.avonhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.avonhistoricalsociety.org)**

**Mary Harrop, 860 670 3225, [mcharrop@yahoo.com](mailto:mcharrop@yahoo.com)**

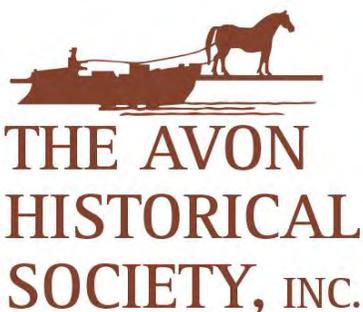
**Sharon Genovese, 860 559 2263, [moldit16@aol.com](mailto:moldit16@aol.com)**

## Quick updates

The Town of Avon has applied to the CT Trust for Historic Preservation for a matching grant to replace the windows of Schoolhouse No. 3 (built 1823) this summer. If granted this will be the first step toward a four-year adaptive reuse plan between the Town and Society to make this building a museum again in 2023 for its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary. More info will follow on these plans as they unfold.

In time for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage (1919) and ratification (2020) of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment to the US Constitution granting women the right to vote, the Society, Library and Senior Center will once again partner to provide an 18-month look at the issue from the perspective of the PRO and ANTI movements in Avon, greater Hartford, CT and the US. A soft opening of events will begin this spring and early summer. The first event will be a performance and discussion with Michele LaRue who portrays a fictional ANTI suffrage character, Marie Jenney Howe, in 1912. The event is entitled "Someone Must Wash the Dishes: An Anti-Suffrage Satire." It will be held on Wed. March 27 at 2:00pm in the Community Room of the Avon Free Public Library. The next event will be a PRO Suffrage presentation by critically acclaimed actress Judith Kalaora who portrays the outspoken 19<sup>th</sup> century "feminist-abolitionist" Lucy Stone who was from Boston. The presentation is entitled "I Now Pronounce You Lucy Stone" and will be held on Saturday, June 8 at 2pm in the Community Room of the Avon Library. The 18-month perspective of the suffrage movement will begin this summer and go until November 2020 with exhibits, books talks, scholarly presentations, etc. organized by a committee of the Society, Library and Senior Center. More to come in future issues of this newsletter and the local media.

The 2019 schedule of exhibits in the HISTORY CORNER, located on the first floor of the Avon Free Public Library, is: Jan-Feb: History of banking from CT Bank and Trust Alumni Club; March-April: 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Apollo 11 Moon Landing; May -June: 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Garden Club of Avon; July-Aug: TWO exhibits – 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Avon Congregational Church & 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Church of St. Ann; Sept-Oct: Anniversary of the McGuff Girl Scout Museum in New Haven, which has an Avon connection; Nov-Dec: Exhibit of late 19<sup>th</sup> c. photographs of Frank Hadsell.



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.

### 2018-2019 Officers and Board of Trustees

#### Officers:

Terri Wilson, President  
Dr. Helaine Bertsch, Vice President  
open, Secretary  
Eric Thronson, Treasurer

#### Trustees:

John Forster  
Mary Harrop  
Ben Isaacson  
Gene Macy  
Carolyn McGrattan  
Cal Miller-Stevens  
Sebastian Saraceno

**Do you shop Amazon? If you do, please go to: <http://smile.amazon.com> and CHOOSE the Avon Historical Society, Avon, CT to have .5% of your purchase donated to us! It's simple and free.**

PO Box 448, Avon, CT 06001-0448, 860.678.7621 • [avonhistoricalsociety.org](http://avonhistoricalsociety.org)

