

Volume 1 | Issue 2  
April, 2023

# Brimfield Historical Commission

---

## *A Message From the BHC*

---

We are excited to share the Brimfield Historical Commission's April newsletter with you. As indicated in last month's issue, our goal is to entertain, inform and educate Brimfielders on the town's amazing history and the Commission's efforts to continue promoting that history. This issue will ask for help on a current day mystery, recognize the legacy of FDR's New Deal, share access to the personal memories of senior residents of the community and recognize the efforts of Board members to preserve and protect historical documents. We look forward to your feedback. Please share your comments, criticisms, and suggestions for how we can continue to improve it and provide a resource the town will look forward to each month with interest and anticipation.

---

## *Members*

---

Sue DeBruin, Chairperson  
Adrienne Bachand  
Roseann Bergdoll  
Robert Corry  
John Curtis  
Michael DeFalco  
Sue Overbey  
Mark Conners, Associate Member

---

## *Official Brimfield Town Flag*

---

In 2002, local resident and 2001 Tantasqua graduate, Nicholas Niemero, utilized his artistic talent to design an official flag for the Town. The flag is white with a seal showing the town symbol, Steerage Rock, on a green field surrounded by a yellow ring stating Town of Brimfield, Hampden County, Massachusetts. Two flags were produced. One was intended for the Town to keep and display. The other was hung in the Massachusetts Statehouse Hall of Flags, where all of the Commonwealth's communities are represented. Unfortunately, the location of the town's copy is not known. We are requesting that anyone who might have any information on where it may be or what may have happened to it, to

please contact the Historical Commission. We would like to see this flag once again proudly displayed.



---

### *Roving Archivist Grant*

---

The Historical Commission, working with Town Clerk, Debra Fagerstrom, received a grant award from the Massachusetts Roving Archivist program\* last year. The grant provided for the services of a trained professional archivist to review the town's historical records and provide advice on policies, procedures, preservation planning, emergency preparedness and setting priorities. On February 21, the archivist, Thomas Doyle, spent two hours with Debra and Commission member, Mike DeFalco, looking at the types of records and the various locations where they are kept and asking questions about our current procedures and needs. In April, he will provide us with a report documenting his recommendations.

The grant is just one component of a larger effort to inventory, preserve and protect hundreds of unique records that document the town's past. Commission members and volunteers have been working for several hours each week since last fall to move items to archival boxes and sleeves and to update a database for each item tracking pertinent information such as date, description and condition.

We look forward to the Archivist's report to continue and extend these efforts.

\*The grant was made possible through the Massachusetts State Historic Records Advisory Board (MASHRAB) and the National Historic Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grant program.

---

### *Brimfield Secession??*

---

In the early 1980s, Brimfield investigated the possibility of seceding from the State of Massachusetts. The following article from the February 16, 1984 issue of the Holyoke Transcript Telegram will recount the issues leading up to this surprising situation.

Two centuries after this feisty little Western Massachusetts town precipitously

declared its independence “from the island of Great Britain” in 1774, town officials are considering seceding from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Selectmen have approved placing an item proposing a committee to study the matter before the voters at the May 14 annual meeting.

The measure, proposed by two residents, Lawrence Lowenthal and Bradford Powers, suggests quitting the state “in order to end the long train of abuses to which not only Brimfield, but this portion of the state has been subjected, culminating in the abrogation of home rule through the hazardous waste facility siting process.”

Several years ago the state Legislature passed a law giving a state siting council the right to decide where hazardous waste facilities would be located. The council overrode local zoning ordinances and permitted a California company to build a \$50 million hazardous waste treatment plant in the town and neighboring West Warren.

Powers, who teaches sociology and anthropology at dean Junior College in Franklin, said Wednesday that the waste site issue only brought matters to a head.

“We have long been upset about the way the state treats western Massachusetts and its people”, Powers told the Daily News in Springfield. “The siting process shows a total absence of the state’s acceptance of home rule. The western part appears to have been forgotten. We must get away from the overpowering attitude of the state.”

No one, including Powers and Lowenthal, knows what avenue Brimfield would have to take to secede if it decided to press the issue.

In 1981, state bureaucrats didn’t even blink when the 650 residents of Goshen in the Berkshire Hills voted in town meeting to quit Massachusetts and ceremoniously replaced the state flag with their own standard – bearing a pine tree on one side and a frowning Indian armed with a bow and arrow on the other.

“It’s important first to see if secession can or should be tested,” Powers said. “We might decide to join with Connecticut but we would need a corridor town to the state border though Holland or Wales,” which lie between Brimfield and the Nutmeg state.

Lowenthal, who works as a historian at the Springfield Armory, said the drowning of four western towns 50 years ago to create the Quabbin Reservoir and supply Boston with drinking water “is a dramatic example of the general insensitivity in Boston to everything west of (Route) 495. They consider us to be a colony with total disregard for our feelings.

It was at the historic Armory that western Massachusetts forces were turned back the only time they took up arms against Boston. Daniel Shays, the leader of the 18<sup>th</sup> century rebellion by western farmers, who found the state Legislature’s taxing policies at the close of the Revolutionary War more onerous than anything the British had imposed, is still considered a hero in these rolling hills.

The townsfolk’s reaction to the possibility of secession was mixed Wednesday. Don Moriarty, who owns a combination restaurant, convenience and liquor store overlooking the 17<sup>th</sup> century town common, guffawed.

Richard Raymond, chairman of the board of selectmen and an outspoken opponent of the hazardous waste facility, said that, personally, he is “mad enough about the commonwealth’s imposition in usurping home rule to want to join in this effort, but I have to look out for the best interests of the town.”

“The selectmen have to work with the state people,” he said. “While I agree with the frustration of the people doing this, we must make sure we know what we’re doing before we do it.”

“It is an interesting proposal. I have long thought he [sic] state doesn’t know we’re out here,” said selectwoman Jean McGann.

---

## *Brimfield Living History Program*

---

Since 2017, the Brimfield Historical Commission in partnership with the Brimfield Cable Access Program under the leadership of then director, Bob Datz, conducted over a dozen professional video-taped live interviews with town residents, many of which were born and raised in Brimfield. Commission member, Robert Corry, conducted the interviews. Anyone interested in viewing these videos are invited to visit the Sherman Room of the Brimfield Library and request assistance from staff. These interviews share people's personal memories and recollections of our community dating back to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Learn about the people, the businesses and the events they experienced, and which helped shape their lives.

Over the course of future newsletters, we will highlight some of these interviews. This month will focus on Sumner D. Barr, 93 when he was interviewed on July 26, 2017. Mr Barr drove himself to the town hall for this interview in his late model Corvette Convertible with a 350HP engine and 6-speed manual transmission.

- He said he was the oldest living former resident of the Village of East Brimfield which is now under water in the flood control reservoir to the south of the causeway at the Brimfield/Sturbridge town line.
- Sumner described East Brimfield as a 'mill town' where 75 – 100 local men and others from surrounding towns worked in the century old Snell Wood Auger manufacturing plant making high quality steel auger drill bits.
- Mr. Snell was a 'hard man.' When the workers at his plant petitioned for higher wages, Snell threatened to close the plant and move the operation to Sturbridge. When the workers persisted, Snell shut down the East Brimfield plant and reopened the operation in the building opposite where Yankee Candle is today.
- He attended a one room school house opposite Five Bridge Road (near where Little Alum Road begins today) with about twenty boys and girls in Grades 1 – 5. His teacher was Florence Gendeau who not only provided academic instruction all day but also was the building janitor & maintained the coal fire in the pot belly stove during cold weather.
- Sumner said discipline was not a problem back then. When the older or younger children were being taught at their grade level the others in the classroom would be given reading assignments.
- He describes how different families were back in pre-WWII America and what would often happen to a child if his parents received word s/he was misbehaving/not doing their school work.
- Children would walk to the schoolhouse to & from their homes usually alone or in small groups. Each child was required to bring two sandwiches and milk to school.
- The Quinebaug River ran through the village and provided waterpower to the Snell Factory. Youth in the village fished, swam, and boated in season.

- The Worcester Street Railroad trolley ran on a single track through town three times a day. The concrete abutments still visible today on the southwest side of the reservoir were part of the railbed for the Grand Trunk and Trolley.
- East Brimfield had no post office or general store. These were in Brimfield Center.
- The Hurricane of 1939 caused widespread flooding and damage to the entire region. Years after this storm the Army Corp of Engineers bought up all the homes and buildings in the lower part of East Village – demolished them – constructed the earthen dam on the east end of the village and flooded what used to be the main village of East Brimfield.
- He graduated from Hitchcock Free Academy in 1942. There were fourteen people in his graduating class.
- He enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1943. When he finished his military enlistment, he went to Embalming School in NYC & worked for a funeral home in Spencer where he was 'on-duty' 24/7/365.
- He concluded his interview by describing how Brimfield has changed since his youth:
  - 'I used to know everyone in town.'
  - 'All the old families when I was a kid are gone.'
  - 'Most of the farms are gone.'

---

### CCC Anniversary

---

2023 is the 90th Anniversary of the founding of the Civilian Conservation Corps, a work relief program established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 as part of his New Deal legislation to combat high unemployment during the Great Depression. One of the many camps established around the country was right here in Brimfield at the State Forest, where several buildings from that era still exist.



This informational plaque is located at the Dean Pond Recreational Area.

The CCC Legacy is a group dedicated to bringing awareness to the heritage of the project, the alumni, and their programs and accomplishments. Their efforts to achieve this are reflected in a press release they've prepared for the anniversary.

#### PRESS RELEASE

This year is the 90th Anniversary of the founding of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC began on April 5, 1933 when President Roosevelt signed the Emergency Conservation Act that was part of the "New Deal" to relieve the poverty and unemployment of the Depression. FDR brought together two unused resources, the young men and the land.

He promised he'd have 250,000 men in camps by the end of July 1933. It targeted single men, 18-25 years old, and WWI veterans in relief of families who had difficulty finding jobs during the Great Depression. Enrollees were paid a dollar a day. Twenty-five dollars was sent home to their parents and the young men had five dollars spending money.

The program provided unskilled manual labor in environmental conservation and the development of natural resources in rural lands. CCC camps were located in all of the 48 states and these territories: Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands- St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix.

Roosevelt chose the Army to supervise the camps which consisted of approx. 200 men each. The Army moved thousands of enrollees from induction centers to working camps in record time. It used its own regular and reserve officers, together with regulars of the Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy to temporarily command camps and companies. Enrollees received good food, uniforms, shelter, and medical care. During the summer of 1933 they lived in tents; later they moved into wooden buildings.

In Massachusetts the main work was in tree planting, firefighting, and tree and plant disease and insect control, although several recreational facilities were also built in the forests and parks. Enrollment in Massachusetts exceeded 99,500 men. An average of 28 camps a year were operated with a total financial obligation within the state of more than \$45,100,000.

The CCC disbanded in 1942 due to desertions, increased employment opportunities, changes in public opinion, lack of funding, and the need for soldiers to serve in World War II.

The CCC program is considered by many to be one of the most successful of Roosevelt's New Deal programs. Roosevelt's "Tree Army" planted more than 3,000,000,000 trees on land made barren from fires, natural erosion, intensive agriculture or logging. In fact, the CCC was responsible for over half the reforestation, public and private, in the nation's history. Enrollees constructed trails and shelters in more than 800 parks nationwide. The CCC helped to shape the modern national and state park systems we enjoy today. CCC companies contributed to an impressive number of state and national park structures that visitors can still enjoy. The CCC developed 94 national park sites including national parks, monuments, recreation areas and historic sites, and created 741 state parks.

The Civilian Conservation Corps Legacy is a national organization that is "Dedicated to research, preservation, and education of future generations to create a better understanding of the CCC and its continuing contribution to American life and culture." Anyone interested in learning about the work of the CCC Legacy and joining should visit [www.ccclegacy.org](http://www.ccclegacy.org) or [facebook.com/groups/cccllegacygroup](https://facebook.com/groups/cccllegacygroup).

---

## Hyde's History

---

The definitive history of early Brimfield is a book titled Historical Celebration of the Town of Brimfield written by the Reverend Charles M. Hyde, D.D. and published in 1879. More commonly known as Hyde's History, the book covers the founding of Brimfield in the early 1700s thru 1876. It also includes genealogies for many of Brimfield's notable families during this period. An original copy is hard to find and may be expensive. Reproductions have been produced in recent years. However, the full text is available for free through GoogleBooks at [Historical Celebration of the Town of Brimfield, Hampden County, Mass - Google Books](#). The Sherman Room at the Brimfield Library has several copies, but they are only available for onsite research.

---

## PLAY BALL!

---

"The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It's been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game, is a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good, and that could be again. Oh people will come, Ray. People will most definitely come."

*Spoken by James Earl Jones to Kevin Costner in Field of Dreams*



Please contact the Historical Commission at our page on the town website ([www.brimfieldma.org/historical-commission](http://www.brimfieldma.org/historical-commission)) if you know who any of these young men are.