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Brimfield Historical Commission

A Message From the BHC

This month's newsletter highlights past efforts to capture the memories of Brimfield's senior citizens and share them with the public. In the early 80s this was carried out through oral histories and in recent years, taking advantage of technological advances, through video histories. In both cases, the process involved interviewing long-time town residents to acquire insights into the town's history not available through other sources. We also update you on the results of the Roving Archivist Grant.

Remember, paper copies of the newsletter will be available at Hitchcock Academy.

Members

Sue DeBruin, Chairperson

Adrienne Bachand

Roseann Bergdoll

Robert Corry

John Curtis

Michael DeFalco

Sue Overbey

Mark Conners, Associate Member

Brimfield Living History – Interview with John Curtis

Have you ever wondered about how people, just like you, lived here in Brimfield 300 years ago? or 258 years ago when the American Revolution took place? or 162 years ago when the Civil War began?

Once again, we are sharing with you another fascinating video history interview hosted by Bob Corry as part of the Living History Program available on local cable access and in the Sherman Room of the Brimfield Library.

This video history is conducted with John Curtis, age 82, who has lived with his wife and sons on Brookfield Road in Brimfield for the past fifty years. John is a

U.S. Navy veteran, graduated from Colby College with a BS degree in History and is a long-standing member of the Brimfield Historical Commission.

John was a professional curator for well over three decades. He helped to create Old Sturbridge Village and continues to be the curator for the Springfield Museums. He has written several books and scholarly papers on American history.

If you would like to see this video interview program or any of the other eight video interview programs each focusing on the life and experiences of a prominent long-time Brimfield resident, go to the Sherman Room in our town library. There is a computer station with a large screen and earphones for your use. The librarian on duty will set up this video program or any Living History program you choose and show you how to use it.

The best way to enjoy this terrific video program is simply to sit back and watch the entire interview (55 minutes). You will learn a great deal of new information about this town & will come away with a new appreciation about how tough life here was in the early days and how far we have come.

If you would prefer to listen to specific subjects within the program of particular interest to yourself, we have included the approximate time (0.00) in the interview where John covers that topic.

Simply move your cursor to the bottom of the video screen & slide the button to the bracketed time listed below.

Program Notes

(1:20) What is a curator and what does s/he do?

(1:50) How Brimfield, Massachusetts was formed

(4:00) Description of a 'family house' in the early 18th Century (1700's)

(8:00) Water supply

(12:00) How early roofs kept the rain and snow out.

(12:20) How the early houses were heated.

- The first electrical service was brought to Brimfield around 1914 (World War I).
- Before electrical service people would go to bed at dark and wake up at dawn.

(24:00) Preserving food before refrigerators, freezers & canned food.

(28:00) The 'Poor House' in Brimfield.

(29:00) Starting a fire for cooking/heating, how the beds were warmed up in cold weather, cooking in the fireplace.

(38:00) The tools and equipment that every household would have.

(39:00) All the neighbors helped each other to raise a barn, harvest the fields, formed a militia for defending the town.

(42:00) How people kept themselves, their bathroom, their clothing and bedding fairly clean.

(47:00) The school system in Brimfield.

(51:00) Annual Townwide festivals in Brimfield's earlier days.

(53:00) Taverns.

(54:00) General store in Brimfield.

(55:00) Skilled trades of people here in Brimfield.

*Roving Archivist Grant
Report*

As noted in a previous newsletter, the Historical Commission, working with Town Clerk, Debra Fagerstrom, received a grant award last fall from the Massachusetts Roving Archivist program.. 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. The archivist visited in late February and provided his report at the beginning of May. Several of his recommendations follow.

- Improve physical and intellectual control over collections.
 - Physical control is "the establishment and tracking of the location of holdings in a repository's custody."
 - Intellectual control is "the establishment and maintenance of documentation that describes and accommodates access to the informational content of archival resources."
- Create a new location for the storage of records.
 - Assess space requirements by determining the volume of current records and estimated future growth.
 - Provide a fire detection system that includes smoke and heat alarms.
 - Provide security through intrusion alarms, motion detectors and limited key access.

- Maintain a stable temperature and relative humidity. Purchase a data logger that is wi-fi connected to monitor fluctuations.
- Purchase industry standard archivally safe boxes and folders.
- Undertake an assessment of which records should be preserved digitally.
- Create a disaster preparedness plan that documents decisions and identifies potential emergency scenarios. The plan should outline steps to address the immediate emergency as well as the recovery phase and include essential call lists, staff/volunteer contacts, salvage priorities, facilities information, and temporary alternate storage sites.

The report also provided online resources and potential grant opportunities which are actively being pursued.

*Oral History Project –
Interview of Richard Brown*

Several decades before the Historical Commission began its Video History Program, local historians conducted approximately 40 oral histories. They were originally recorded on tape cassettes. In recent years about 20 were converted to CDs. Like the video histories, they are available in the Sherman Room.

These audio interviews are designed to highlight the many ways our community has grown and the many contributions that have been made by our citizens. Listening to these stories you will learn about our history which helps in understanding how the events of the past helped shape the way they are today. With lessons from the past, we not only learn about ourselves and how we came to be but also how to develop the ability to avoid mistakes and create better paths for the future.

The interview with Richard Brown (one of the few that have been transcribed) was conducted on December 4, 1992 by Larry Lowenthal and describes the changes to the First Congregational Church which occurred between 1929 and 1979. He shares the efforts it took for the upkeep, repairs and various renovations as well as the different Pastor's and their families that were instrumental in shaping the church and the community.

Here's just a sample:

- L.L. How far back does your association with the Brimfield church go?
- R.B. Well, it goes back to the point in time when I was in my late teens. In my early childhood I went to Sunday School and so forth as all kids did in those days. But I think I really began to be seriously involved in my late

teens and my early twenties. And the first job that I performed in connection with the church was as Sunday School superintendent. That was a short time, and I might say a project which I didn't particularly involve [sic], but that we were very strapped for help and that was it.

L.L. What years are we talking about for that?

R.B. 1950's. And I progressed to other jobs in the church. I've been a member of the choir for about 30 years and I was treasurer for about 22 years.

L.L. That goes back to about 1970, then?

R.B. Yes. And before I was a treasurer I was a member of the board of trustees and I've been a member of many committees, off and on through the years. The prime thing that I was seriously involved in which took a lot of time, were the changes in the church building itself. The first serious renovation that I was involved with was 1965 and that was the first stage of the existing program. I was chairman of that committee.

L.L. The building renovation committee?

R.B. Yes. And this concerned the first stage which involved the lower floors of the church, and the addition of classroom space on the back, the new kitchen, the new bathrooms, and so forth, that was done in 1965.

L.L. What was the heating system before that, just out of curiosity?

R.B. Before that we had a very inadequate forced hot air system. And even prior to that, referring to the 1971, 250th Anniversary program, prior to that there had been two huge hot air furnaces in the lower level of the church which heated the sanctuary and part of the Fellowship Hall. There was augmented heat from a stove in the Fellowship Hall where the stovepipe which ran the whole length of the church at ceiling level. And this was a carry over from previous days and this was a common practice in those days to spread the heat through the building. Unfortunately, that was one of the reasons that the second building burned, because of the overheated stovepipe. At various times through the years the present building was renovated to accomplish various purposes. One thing that is not mentioned in the 250th Anniversary program is any mention at all of the pulpit in the church. At the time the pipe organ was installed which was dedicated on May 25th, 1930., at the same time the architecture of the front of the church was changed somewhat. At that time the present pulpit was brought down from the attic, reconditioned, refinished and installed in its present location. I think it's important that the mention of this pulpit be made because it was a product of a Brimfield cabinet maker by the name of Penuel Parker. It's important today because this Mr. Parker was great-grandfather of Barbara Wood Keith. She is in the process of having a plaque made stating these facts. The pulpit, I think was relegated to the attic at the time the interior of the church was done over in the period

when the painted frescoes were put on the walls. Of course, these disappeared in the hurricane of 1938. Incidentally, the cabinet shop was located on lower Haynes Hill Rd. directly across from the present brick house and Barbara Keith's mother was a Parker.

Did You Know?

The real name of the Brimfield Public Library is the Danielson Lincoln Memorial Library. Dedicated on June 30, 1904, it was a gift from James Danielson Lincoln, in memory of his mother, Sarah B. Danielson Lincoln and his wife, Eliza Melcher Lincoln.

Brimfield Vital Records

If you are doing any research on early Brimfield residents, a great resource is [The Vital Records of Brimfield, Massachusetts To the Year 1850](#). It contains all the Births, Deaths and Marriages for Brimfield from its founding to 1850. A hard copy of the book can be found in the Sherman Room along with similar resources for most of the other communities in the state.