



The Hourglass

CLXXXVI NORTHBOROUGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY November 2009
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Next Meeting December 4, 2009 – Northborough Historical Society 7:30 PM

A Good Olde New England Christmas – Even though Christmas was once banned in Boston, New Englanders have always celebrated the season with songs and music. Here are songs to “drive the cold winter away!” Presented by Jim Douglas, historical balladeer. Hosted by *Hartley and Diane Grandin and Mary Kennerly*.

Ralph Waldo Emerson in “Paradise,” 1822

In the spring of 1822, Ralph Waldo Emerson was teaching in the “School for Young Ladies in Boston,” then operated by his older brother William. He was a shy graduate of Harvard College, just turned nineteen, and he did not much like teaching. At the end of the year he and William decided to go for a walk—not one of today’s walks, as far as the car in the driveway or, in a rare ambulatory fit, around the block. They walked to Northborough, where “we found a very pretty farmhouse, and they easily consented to board us for a week,” as Waldo (to give his favorite name) wrote, back in Boston a few days later, to his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson.

William wrote to their mother from Northborough in a letter begun on May 31 and continuing on June 3. He noted that since his brother had already written her, “nothing remains for me to tell.” Unfortunately, Waldo’s letter seems not to have survived, and as a result some of the more famous brother’s experiences are lost to us. William does tell us that Waldo had gone fishing on nearby “Little Chauncy,” and of the Sunday habits of townspeople, as I noted in the October *Hourglass*. His four-page letter is now a part of the Massachusetts Historical Society collection.

Waldo, however, has more to say in his letter to his aunt: “We passed our time in a manner exceedingly pleasant.” She had told him that woodland life was intoxicating, but in his mind the tendency of the Northborough wilderness “was directly opposed to the slightest effort of

mind or body; it was a soft animal luxury, the combined result of the beauty which fed the eye; the exhilarating Paradise air, which fanned & dilated the sense; the novel melody which warbled from the trees.”

Thus dazzled by rural Northborough, then the home of only a little more than one thousand people, he confessed that “Not once, during our stay, was I in any fit mood to take my pen ‘and rattle out the battle of my thoughts.’” But he did keep busy in a literary way. “We dwelt near a pond which bore the name of ‘Little

Chauncy,’ and often crossed it in a boat, then tied our bark to a tree on the opposite shore and plunged into the pathless woods . . . and lounged on the grass, with Bacon’s Essays & Milton for hours.”

They never identify their hosts in these letters. The houses closest to the pond at that time stood about where today we find Chauncy Hall, the first of the Westborough State Hospital buildings, on

your left just before you leave town on Lyman Street, almost opposite today’s unpaved road to the pond. It may be that William and Waldo lodged either with the family of Henry Brigham or that of Winslow Brigham. Henry was then fifty-four, had two sons from earlier marriages (both wives died young), and four children, all five years of age and under, by his third wife Betsy (a hardy woman who did not die until 1871 at the age of eighty-nine). Winslow was an older man who had a wife, and also, as the 1820 census suggests, probably a daughter or daughter-in-law and some granddaughters with him.



He seems to have been the only man in the household.

While the brothers were dwelling near Little Chauncey (sometimes spelled with an 'e,' sometimes without), another brother, Edward, joined them for a while. He and Waldo walked off one day to Worcester. In 1822 no specific motive would have been necessary for this little additional stroll.

Emerson had no close connections to Northborough that we know of. He had studied with Henry Ware, the father of First Church minister Joseph Allen's wife Lucy, and he may have had a nodding acquaintance with Rev. Allen. Had he known the latter well, he probably would have dropped in on him, as countless people did. As time went on, Emerson renounced the Unitarian faith of which he was for a few years a minister himself, and he may never again have visited Northborough, but for a week the pond, the woods, and the fields gave the young man a pleasing vacation.

Bob Ellis, Historian

Curator's news
We have had many interesting accessions over the past month. Arthur Bachand donated three Northborough High School yearbooks from the 1950s and his sports photos. Classmate Don Starkey donated his football jacket, and woolen baseball uniform of 1959. Ed Sheehan donated an early N. High school yearbook from 1946 and his father's framed commission for N. Postmaster, 1940. And another wonderful donation of two medical day-log books of Dr. Henry A. Jewett from 1849 to 1893 from his descendant, Susan Stokes. Thank you all for saving Northborough's history.

And up in the museum, the sad task of taking down our bridal exhibit has begun. My thanks to Cindy Atwood, Kathy Pierce and Betty Tetreault for all their help in the cold museum.

Ellen Racine, Curator.

Board of Directors Meeting
November 24, 2009
7:30 PM Historical Society Building

Membership
Northborough Historical Society

Membership Dues:
Regular \$15.00; Student and Seniors (65 and over) \$10.00; Family \$35.00; and Life \$250.00.

Dues should be sent to
Judy Bissett
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A red square on your label indicates that it is time to renew your membership.

Northborough Historical Society

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