



The Hourglass

CLXXXV NORTHBOROUGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY October 2009

www.Northboroughhistsoc.org

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Next Meeting October 30, 2009 – Northborough Historical Society 7:30 PM

Beating the Demons – Known as the apostle of cold water, John B. Gough of Boylston was a recovering alcoholic whose dramatic lectures about his fight for sobriety kept his audiences spellbound in Northborough and far beyond. Actor J. T. Turner showcases the great oratory style of that era in a presentation still relevant today.

Hosted by Jo Ann Sullivan, Jane Fletcher, and Sandra Chaurette.

Temperance in Northborough

Americans consumed a great deal of liquor in the early decades of the nation. The earliest document in our collection about the misuse of alcohol was signed by thirty men, many of them prominent in the town. They pledged to work to discourage the use of “wine or ardent spirits” by *mourners*, that is by people commemorating a funeral. The document is dated 1817; the year appears to have been entered in another hand and might be inaccurate, but the pledge was surely written no later than the 1820s, when the temperance movement was growing nationally.

Two young men visiting near Little Chauncey Pond in Northborough in 1822 (one of whom, who later became famous, will be identified in a later essay) give us this account of a Sunday. “We walked very soberly to meeting, and after meeting walked as soberly to the tavern, it being customary with the good people in this part of Northborough not to return till after evening service, as the distance is 2½ miles.”

Reverend Kent, in his *Northborough History*, asserted that at this time “everybody drank,” and that a minister was so often offered toddies at the homes he visited that he often “needed assistance in finding his way home.” Although Cyrus Gale was an early participant in the local temperance movement, examination of the ledgers of his general store, according to Kent, showed liquor to be a prominent article of trade there.

But change was in the air. In 1836 the boys in Rev. Joseph Allen’s boarding school promoted the changing of the name of the hill in the middle of town from “Liquor Hill” to “Mount Assabet.” In 1838 Massachusetts passed what became known as the “15-Gallon Law,” banning purchases of hard liquor of less than that

amount. Like many other attempts at this sort of legislation, however, it failed and was rescinded.

In the 1840s, John B. Gough of neighboring Boylston, threw off the effects



of alcohol and became one of the foremost temperance speakers, as our program on October 30 (please note the date) will make clear. By the 1860s temperance took somewhat of a back seat to the Civil War. But S. S. Ashley, minister of the Evangelical Congregational Church, was busily crusading against drink. Addressing the Worcester & Middlesex Temperance Union on November 11, 1862, he said “Though many battles have been fought, and great successes achieved, still the temperance millennium is delayed. The foe is still strong entrenched within our borders. His missiles are doing a fatal work. The conflict promises to be life-long. One battlefield opens the way to another. Nevertheless the cause marches to certain triumph.”

His abundance of military metaphors is not surprising, for Ashley was also devoted to duty in the raging war that was already being seen as one not only for civil union but against slavery. He had already been to battlefields to care for wounded and sick Northborough soldiers and would later participate vigorously in Reconstruction. At this point, however, he came armed with statistics about liquor. “The number of arrests for drunkenness during the year 1861, in the city of Boston, amounted to over ten per cent of the whole population—18,520 ar-

rests.”

Many people blamed the Irish, of whom they were now many in Boston, for this problem, but it had long been general. The Northboro Temperance Reform Club, formed after the war, brought together Irish and Yankees, who otherwise had little in common. The membership, which grew to more than two hundred people, included not only names like Bigelow and Brigham and Hildreth but Callahan and Mack and McCarty. The club met monthly for years, signed pledges, listened to speakers, sang songs, probably helped keep many people sober, but of course did not end drinking.

In 1866 Cyrus Gale told Rev. Allen that although he was a member of his congregation, he believed that the Evangelical Congregational Church was doing a better job of discouraging the use of liquor. One has to wonder whether he was still selling it in his store.

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the contention raged. Selectmen’s raids on Northborough’s two hotels early in the 1900s time and again turned up evidence that although liquor was banned, it continued to be dispensed. Then came the massive federal effort, the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution along with its supporting legislation, which prevailed from 1919 to 1933. But was it obeyed in Northborough any more strictly than elsewhere?

Temperance in the sense of prohibition is now dead. In its original sense of “moderation,” though, it seems like a good idea.

Curator's news

Applefest was a huge success and many thanks to Forest Lyford and his committee who produced a wonderful luncheon, cookie walk and ice cream social. We had a wonderful day and had

many visitors in the museum after the parade. Allyn Phelps III entertained us for two straight hours on the 1874 Stevens organ and we were thrilled with his varied selections. The Northborough Art Guild displayed 57 paintings and they were enhanced with many floral arrangements from members of the Northborough Garden Club.

Our newly designed coffee mugs are available for sale any time by giving me a call or visiting the museum on Sundays from 2 to 4:00. They are in blue with a vintage photo of the old Town Hall.

New Acquisitions:

1976 Bicentennial papers from Parker Swan

1906 graduation program and letters from Arthur Pierce, 1908-9 from Tony & Cheryl Arsenault

Ellen Racine, Curator.

Board of Directors Meeting
October 20, 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
300 Ball St.
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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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