
HISTORICAL NOTES

Volume 15 Issue 1

JULY 2009

**HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING TO BE HELD
SATURDAY, JULY 25, 2009 AT 11:00 A.M. AT THE UNION CHURCH**

Prudence Island: A Look Inside

That's the title of the talk to be given by PIHPS Vice President Joe Bains, during the PIHPS Annual Meeting on Saturday July 25 at 11:00 A.M. at the Union Church.

At 11:00 a.m., we will hold a brief business meeting, with the election of officers, and also discuss recent activities of the Historical Society, including an update on the progress of the Margaret Beck Memorial Gazebo project and the commemorative brick floor.

Afterwards, Joe Bains will provide a glimpse of what it was like indoors over the years with "Prudence Island – A Look Inside." He will show photos of the interiors of houses, stores and other buildings.

Please join us for this interesting meeting. You will not want to miss it. You will find an agenda and some additional information on page 2. The Society will also display a number of recent additions to its collection.



FROM THE PRESIDENT

I am pleased to report that there was much work accomplished this past year on the Margaret Beck Memorial Gazebo. I would like to thank especially Jim Lyons and Frank Jurnak for installing the brick floor and the commemorative bricks as each order arrived.

If you haven't done so already (and even if you did), you are welcome to honor a family member, loved

one, or friend, by purchasing an engraved brick which people will see for many years.

You can use the form included in this newsletter, pick one up during the annual meeting, or download a form from our website, <http://www.prudencehistory.com>.

Help us plan for the future – The officers meet periodically as the Executive Committee to plan programs and continue the progress of this organization. But, four people should not do this alone. If you have an idea or two and would like to help the society grow and fulfill its mission to preserve historic buildings and locations on this island, collect and preserve memorabilia, and encourage research of the island, please see me, Joe Bains, Judi Foster or Theckla Snell at the annual meeting or anytime.

Don't let us have all the fun – you
(Continued on page 2) →

Inside This Issue

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Annual Meeting & Program |
| | The President's Column |
| 2 | Sarah's Path/Dues Reminder |
| 2 | Prudence Island in the Old Days |
| | |
| | |
-
-

(Message From the President – Continued)

can participate in documenting Island history with old photos, articles, or even Podcasts on our website. You can donate old photos, or lend them to the Historical Society to copy for our collection or include in future slide shows on our website.

If you want to help out, let us know at the annual meeting, or e-mail us at: PIHPSociety@verizon.net.

You can now see what's going on with the Prudence Improvement Association, read their newsletter and look at a schedule of events via the PIA link on the PIHPS website, or by clicking this link: <http://prudencehistory.com/PIA/PIA.html>

Historically,

John C. Thresher

Annual Meeting – Saturday July 25th at the Union Church, 11:00 a.m.

Annual Meeting Agenda

- Secretary's & Treasurer's Reports
- Old & New Business
- Review of 2008
- Sarah's Path
- Nominating Committee
- Election of Officers
- Speaker Joseph Bains: "Prudence Island – A Look Inside"

HISTORICAL NOTES

Sarah's Path at Farnham Farm

Sarah's Path was named in honor of Sarah Farnham, who had a lifelong interest in nature, especially flowering plants and trees. The path was created over time, from 1896 to about 1907, and was designed to connect the north and south orchards and to provide a pleasant stroll for guests of the farm. The path was lined with trees, shrubs and flowering plants that were popular in the Victorian era. Sarah's Path was never finished because the Farnhams left the island shortly after the death of Edward Farnham in 1907.

In 2006, the PIHPS agreed to assume responsibility for the restoration of Sarah's Path and the development of a commemorative brick area associated with the path and gazebo. Thanks to the help of Jim Lyons and Frank Jurnak, the brick area is now complete. Plans this summer are to erect latticework around the gazebo and place a bronze plaque honoring Margaret Beck.

The PIHPS is now offering a third order of bricks: The order will be placed late this summer, and the new engraved bricks will be laid next summer. After this year, the PIHPS will hand back the restoration and maintenance of Sarah's Path to the Farnham Farm Trustees, and they will handle future brick orders

Dues Reminder

Please take a moment to complete the enclosed 2009 PIHPS membership renewal form. Individual/Family memberships are \$10.00. A Life Membership is also available to any member for a one-time fee of \$500.00. Your dues help to fund the Society's activities and programs. Please help us to preserve Prudence Island's rich history by returning the enclosed form along with your check today.



A couple of commemorative bricks after they were installed at the gazebo last year. Photo by John C. Thresher

Prudence Island in the Old Days

More interesting Census (and other) information about the Holbrooks and Palmers

By John C. Thresher

Last year, I wrote a brief article about the Holbrooks and the Palmers, two families who were of the original summer residents of Homestead Plat on Prudence Island's east shore. The Holbrooks were the first family to have their own cottage on Homestead Plat: The Cedars, the cottage named for the two cedar trees which had marked a path from the shore to Indian Spring, was built in 1907-08. Unfortunately, due to a lack of time and space, last year's article ended abruptly at 1920.

To recap, I was surprised to find the Holbrooks and Palmers listed in the Seekonk, Mass. records of the U. S. Census, even though I knew they came from Attleboro, Mass.; even some of the old Portsmouth Tax books from the late 1910s listed Holbrook and Palmer as being from Attleboro. Looking further into these records from 1900, 1910, and 1920, I found that the Holbrook family was living in Hebronville, a mill

village located mostly in Attleboro, but also in part of northern Seekonk: George D. and his wife Ella J. were listed in the Seekonk census as living on North Taunton Ave. (which by 1920 had been changed to its present name of Oak Hill Ave.). It is probably safe to conclude that the Holbrooks and Palmers received their mail from the Hebronville Post Office, which was in operation though at least the early 1920s, and thus be considered from Attleboro.

George D. and Ella J. Holbrook had five children: George S., Amey E. (the correct spelling of her first name), Clifton D., Winford F., and Earle G.

Even though the census forms are quite useful in providing information, they are prone to errors, especially since the census taker was relying on inaccurate information given by individuals, and the taker may have made mistakes when filling out the form. Also, the reader often would have trouble reading the form, especially images copied from microfilm, either because of a poor copy, bad writing, or both.

I quickly found this out in my own research: As of June 13, 1900, George D. Holbrook, age 43, was listed as being born in Rhode Island in July 1856. His wife, Ella J. Holbrook, age 35, was born in English Canada in August 1864. They were married 18 years.

But, as of May 13, 1910, George was listed with his age at 56, born in Pennsylvania, and married for 29 years. Most likely, this census taker by mistake wrote down the year of George's birth, instead of his age.

George S. Holbrook, the oldest child, appears to have been born in March 1883; Amey E., March 1885; Clifton D., March 1887; Winford F., either March 1885 (according to the 1900 form) or late 1888 or early 1889 (1910 form); and Earle G., March 1899.

HISTORICAL NOTES

By May 13, 1910, Amey was married to Clarence E. Palmer for 3 years, and they were living with the Holbrooks. They were both 25 years old. By then, Clarence Palmer and all the Holbrook men were employed at jewelry shops: most were bench hands, except for Clifton, who was listed as a toolmaker.

By 1920, the Palmers had a one-year-old daughter, Helen, and Clarence was now working as a Silversmith. It appears that Helen had died sometime in the 1920s, as she was not listed in the 1930 census. Ella J. Holbrook was now a widow, but there was no information about when her husband died. Winford Holbrook was not listed with the rest of the family, and I was unable to find him listed in the 1920 index provided by HeritageQuest Online, the database providing this census information. Information provided from other sources, such as vital records or newspaper obituaries, would certainly help fill in the blanks.

Incidentally, in 1900 and 1910, another Holbrook family lived on the same street, either next door, or in the same apartment building: Sylvanus C. and Annie E., and son Chester E. They were all born in Rhode Island. Perhaps this family was related to the other Holbrooks, either as brothers or cousins.

According to the 1900 census, Sylvanus and Annie were married 25 years. Sylvanus, a hair cloth mill operator, was born in 1851 (age 49), Annie in 1854 (age 46), and Chester in October 1881 (18). Chester worked at a jewelry plant.

But, the 1910 form listed Sylvanus as 61 or 67 years old; Annie, 58 (married for 41 years), and Chester, age 29. By 1910, Chester was married to Evelyn, and they were living in the same household.

I was unable to find any information about this family in

1920. By 1930, I found nothing about Sylvanus or Annie. (The 1930 Census is not indexed by HeritageQuest Online: one has to click through the forms page by page.) It appears that Chester E. Holbrook, of Oak Hill Ave., had his own manufacturing business. It appears he had a second wife, Mary, age 31, and he married her sometime around 1924. His mother-in-law, Georgiana Hoyt, was also living with them. Hoyt, age 58, was a nurse.

By 1930, Ella J. Holbrook was listed as living on Prudence Island, along with son Clifton, and Clarence and Amey Palmer. By then, Clarence's occupation was listed as a home carpenter, and Clifton was not working.

On Prudence Island (what is not shown on the Census form)

By 1930, Clifton, or "Tin," as he was known on the island, was partially paralyzed after he had fallen off a roof several years earlier. He had trouble walking, and he could only use one arm. However, he spent a lot of time in his workshop behind the Cedars cottage: Clifford Thresher, my father, remembers that as a boy, he would hang around and watch Tin make such things as cribbage boards out of wood. Tin had quite an assortment of tools, many of which he adapted for use by his working hand and steadied against his body. He also fashioned a hand drill to be powered by a foot pedal.

Tin gave one cribbage board to my father and one to my grandfather. These boards were not just one piece of wood with holes drilled in them: On my father's board, Clifton would inlay with precision the peg rows with several types of wood in decorative patterns, along with a few round decorative inlays around the edges. He fashioned the pegs out of some brass latches from old handbags.

4

In addition to the Census records, one can sometimes get a rough idea of when someone built or expanded a house by looking at other sources, such as a town's tax books showing property valuations.

(This was partially true with my research on the Holbrooks and the Palmers: Unfortunately, I have not been able to look at every Portsmouth tax book from the early 1900s through the 1920s. With some, I was only able to scribble notes quickly, so I may have missed some information that I could pick up afterward on ones I was able to photocopy.)

The Cedars cottage was built on the lot along Narragansett Avenue and Holbrook Ave. in 1907-08. Historian Charles Maytum indicated this was the first summer cottage built on Homestead Plat, just after Madison Cram subdivided this parcel.

But, this may not be the case: According to Arlene Butler, Cram's granddaughter, Madison built a house, as a model home, on Alice Ave., diagonally behind the Cedars. This does not show up in the tax books, because all of Cram's property valuation was totaled on one line. Amey Palmer had purchased this house, most likely from Madison Cram, in either 1911 or 1912. Palmer then sold it to Ethel Lund in the late 1920s.

(In those days, it was common to list the wife as owner of record.)

In addition to the Cedars cottage (owned by Ella J. Holbrook), George D. Holbrook purchased the lot directly behind them on Holbrook Ave. (possibly when they bought the lot for the Cedars, but definitely by 1909-10). Possibly earlier, but definitely by 1920, judging by the building valuation, the Holbrooks had built a house on this lot, and another house on the corner of Narragansett and Holbrook. The former cottage, called Greystone, was probably for other Holbrook family members or for rental property. They eventually sold this house to Thomas Taber in



Copyright, Mary Brown Lawrence.

A 1920s view of the Cedars cottage (above, with chimney), and, to its right, the Shelter, owned by the Holbrook family. Greystone, which can be seen behind them, was also owned by the Holbrooks, who later sold it to the Thomas Taber. Part of the boat house, which housed a speedboat owned by Winford Holbrook, can be seen on the beach. Both were destroyed during the hurricane in 1938. At the far right is the HATETOQUITTIT cottage, owned by Isadore Bouchard, a barber from Woonsocket who also set up shop on Prudence. His grandson Hank Bouchard was an announcer on WPRO and Channel 12 for many years.

1934. (Apparently the Tabers were renting the property, as I thought they were coming to the island since at least the mid-1920s.) The cottage on the corner, called The Shelter, eventually became owned by Earle G. Holbrook. He sold this cottage to Henry Ferry in 1964, after renting it to him for some years, with the rent going towards the purchase.

By 1929 (possibly as early as 1926), Amey Palmer, with Victor I. Miller, had purchased four lots on the Prudence Heights Plat, south of Pier Road. It appears there were two houses built (probably by Clarence Palmer), with the Palmers living in one on Pier Road. By then, Victor and Clarence were partners (Miller & Palmer) running the Homestead Casino, the store, dance hall and post office at the Homestead pier.

By 1932, it appears that Victor Miller had died -- his name was no longer listed in the tax books, and the Union Church installed a stained glass window in his memory. It appears Clarence Palmer became the sole owner of the Casino (although it was still listed as Miller & Palmer); Amey

became the sole owner of the Prudence Heights property.

By 1933, Clarence Palmer also was listed as the owner of the Sandy Point Store (which also went by the name of Miller & Palmer, according to Todd Farnham). Both buildings were destroyed by the hurricane in September 1938; Palmer rebuilt both by the next summer. He was shown owning these businesses through the 1940s. By 1940, Nicholas Herlein had built The Friendly Store across Landing Lane from Palmer's store at Sandy Point. Palmer was shown owning both businesses through the 1940s.

It appears Amey Palmer died sometime in late 1940 or early 1941, since her name was not listed in the tax books after 1940. She would have been 50 or 51 years old by then. Clarence later remarried, but further research would be needed to determine when. There should still be a few people who remember Elizabeth Palmer, who helped run the store at the Casino and, after the 1954 Hurricane, up the hill on Pier Road. It appears Clarence Palmer died sometime in 1952, because his property is listed



1953 photo of (left to right) Betsy Palmer, Harriet Cram, and Dot Toles. (Arlene Cram Butler's scrapbook, from the collection of Steve Butler).



A postcard view of the Homestead Casino, rebuilt after the 1938 Hurricane. In her scrapbook, Arlene Cram Butler noted it was built with lumber from the cow barn at the Garland Estate. Below, Clarence E. Palmer inside the grocery store portion of the Casino.



under Clarence E. Palmer Estate in the 1953, 1954 and 1955 tax books. Elizabeth was listed as the owner in the 1956 through 1964 tax books: She either died in 1964 or just sold her property that year to Michael and Marcy Bachini.

Ella J. Holbrook probably died sometime in 1948 or 1949, since the 1949 tax book now listed Winford as the owner of the Cedars. She would have been about 85 years old at that time. Winford and Clifton (Wint and Tin) Holbrook continued living at the Cedars through the 1950s. Clifton died before Winford; further research is needed to determine when. Sometime in 1962 or 1963, Rita Osborne became the owner of the Cedars.

I remember seeing Earle Holbrook once or twice on Prudence Island when I was a child. He stayed with John and Lorraine Holbrook, his son and daughter-in-law from Buffalo, when they rented a cottage nearby for a few weeks in July. One time, Earle would talk to me about the stars and planets and explain why they twinkled in the night sky.

I found out later that Earle lived in Attleboro and had worked as an engineer at the Foxboro Company, and he had previously been involved with the Manhattan Project that developed the atomic bomb in World War II. Earle died sometime in the mid- to late-1970s.

Although this article is not a complete history of the Holbrook and Palmer families, I hope it sheds some more light on these two families who participated in the change and growth of Prudence Island in the early and mid-20th Century. Growing up, I heard many stories about them from my family and neighbors on the island. Unfortunately, this source of history is now lost.

Sources:

HeritageQuest Online (U.S. Census); *United States Official Postal Guide* July 1922; *Tax book for the Town of Portsmouth* (many years); Arlene Cram Butler (oral history and scrapbook); Clifford E. Thresher, Jr. (oral history).



Al and Tin Holbrook at the Cedars cottage, probably sometime in the 50s.

(From Arlene Cram Butler's scrapbook, the collection of Steve Butler.)

HISTORICAL NOTES

PIHPS MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

**Please Make Check Payable to Prudence Island Historical & Preservation Society, Inc.
(PIHPS) And Mail To:**

**Prudence Island Historical & Preservation Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 193
Prudence Island, RI 02872**

Individual/Family Membership ____ \$10.00

Supporting Membership ____ \$25.00

Benefactor Membership ____ \$50.00

Life Membership ____ \$500.00

Name: _____

Address: _____

**If you are interested in helping with Historical Society activities please provide
telephone number and/or e-mail address below:**
