



# Sign Post

May 2023

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## Playing in Coventry's Past

By John Holmy, Town Historian

An old map and Bill Jobbagy's book about Coventry's water powered mills put me on the path of a local history adventure. While looking at the 1869 School District Map, something in District VII labeled as "Toy Shop" on the Andover/Coventry line caught my eye.



Along the Skungamaug River, is the "Toy Shop, M. Watrous" from the 1869 School District map of Coventry

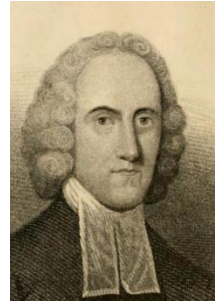
A toy shop in 19th century Coventry?!! This is exciting! I consulted Bill Jobbagy's book about Coventry's water powered mills. Coventry's brooks, streams, and rivers, the Willimantic River, Hop River, Skungamaug River, Mill Brook, and smaller streams, were home to numerous water powered mills that made a wide array of products. Bill's book is a wonderful guide to these sites, and sure enough, along the Skungamaug River, there was a listing for the Toy Shop.

(Cont'd on Page 2)

## Early Ministers of Coventry

Thursday, May 18, 7-9 pm, First Congregational Church

The public is invited to join us for a free program on Thursday, May 18, from 7-9 pm in the sanctuary of Coventry's First Congregational Church, 1171 Main St, for a discussion on the history of the Church and some of its notable ministers from its inception through 1838. Our guest speaker will be Dr. Christian Cuthbert, Senior Pastor at Vernon's Union Church, who holds both a masters in theology and church history, with emphasis on colonial church history in the area. We will discuss topics such as Connecticut's colonial congregational church and colony laws as the town and church were being established, the first and second great awakenings and several notable Coventry first church ministers, as well as a few notable itinerant ministers and some First Church history. While in the sanctuary, appreciate the recent renovation to the church following a structural failure of the meeting house's original timber frame. Refreshments will follow. We look forward to seeing you there.

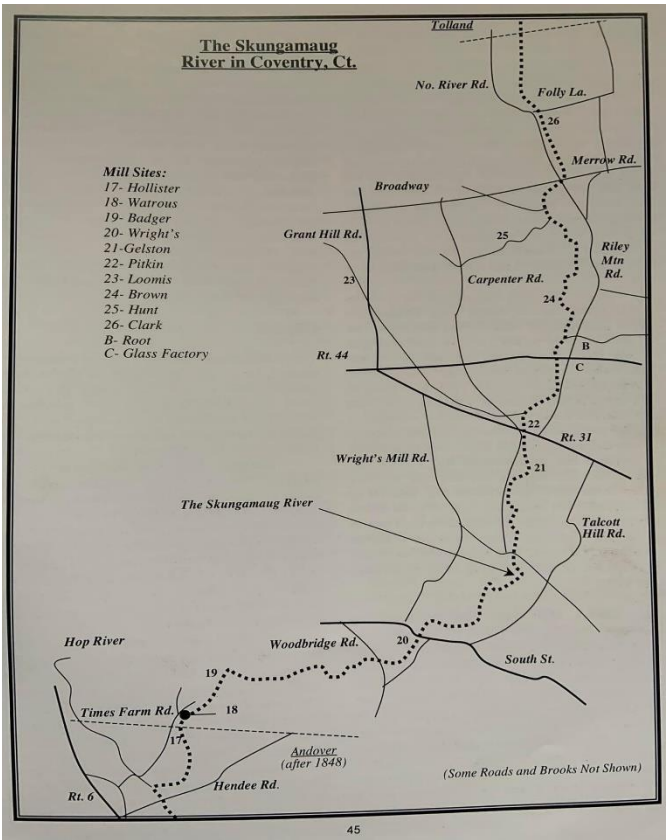


### Mark Your Calendars

May 6	Tag Sale, 8am-4pm, Strong Porter House
May 11	Executive Board Mtg, 630 pm, Strong Porter
May 18	Early Ministers of Coventry, 7pm, First Cong Church
Jun 8	Executive Board Mtg, 630 pm, Strong Porter
Jun 10	Cemetery Tour (details to come)
Jun 18	Sundae on a Sunday, 1-3pm, Brick School
Jul 8	Appraisal Day, 1-4pm, Strong Porter
Jul 13	Executive Board Mtg, 630 pm, Strong Porter
Aug 6	Member Appreciation, 3-5pm, Strong Porter
Aug 10	Executive Board Mtg, 630 pm, Strong Porter
Aug 26	Caprilands Style Luncheon (details to come)
Sep 14	Executive Board Mtg, 630 pm, Strong Porter
Sep 17	Annual Meeting (details to come)
Oct 12	Executive Board Mtg, 630 pm, Strong Porter

**Playing in Coventry's Past (Cont'd from Page 1)**

According to Bill's book, Arnold Carlson believed the Connecticut Historical Society has a Watrous bureau in their collection. I contacted them, and yes they do! I made an appointment to visit and they graciously let me examine their bureau.



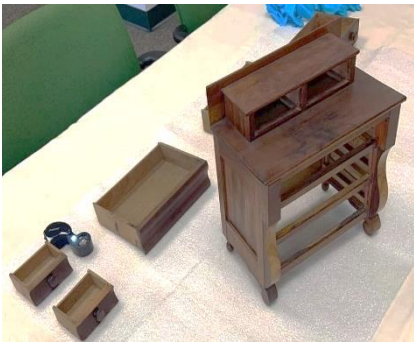
*Water powered mill sites along the Skungamaug River, from Bill Jobbagy's book. The Toy Shop is site 18 and is where the Channel 3 Kids Camp is today.*

A fellow named Mahlon Watrous operated a mill that made wooden spools for thread and toy size wooden bureaus in the second half of the 19th century. His mill was located where the Channel 3 Kids Camp is today in Andover. Andover was part of Coventry until 1848.



*A toy size wooden bureau made by Mahlon Watrous at his toy shop. This bureau is in the Connecticut Historical Society's collection.*

*Mahlon Watrous' 1870 census record list his occupation as "toy manufacturer".*



*The bureau comes all apart.*



*It's a toy size bureau that is only 9" in height by 9 1/2" wide and 6" deep.*



*It's the kind of toy children were meant to play quietly with on a Sunday afternoon.*



*On the back of the Connecticut Historical Society Bureau is the maker's stencil.*

(Cont'd on Page 3)

### Playing in Coventry's Past (Cont'd from Page 2)

Being able to handle, photograph, and measure the bureau at the Connecticut Historical Society was a genuine thrill! Apparently, mine was the first inquiry in many years since Arnold Carlson's.

A month later we visited the Lyman Allyn Museum in New London. Visits are free there on the first Saturday of each month. The Lyman Allyn Museum has a display of toy size furniture. In their display are two Mahlon Watrous bureaus, recognizable by their distinctive feet. I encourage you to visit the museum and find them for yourself



*Local toymaker Mahlon Watrous is buried in the cemetery of the Andover Congregational Church.*

Copies of the 1869 map and Bill Jobbagy's water powered mill book are available for purchase from your

Coventry Historical Society. Doing so may result in local history adventures of your own! <https://ctcoventryhistoricalsociety.dreamhosters.com/>

### Nathan Hale

#### Connecticut's State Hero

Late in March we heard a remark said by Governor Lamont about changing the official state hero from Captain Nathan Hale to another historic personage. We



became alarmed but believed that this would not pass in the legislature. We were advised that State Rep Tim Ackert invited Gov Lamont for breakfast in the village and afterwards showed him one of the monuments to Captain Hale, and the Governor agreed perhaps he was too hasty in suggesting a change of official state heroes. There is no legislation planned at this time to change the official state hero from Captain Nathan Hale.

### Message from the President - Jim Murphy


Spring is here! We will be opening the museums coinciding with the opening of the Farmers Market. As we move out of covid isolation we've begun offering a robust program calendar for members - Early Taverns of Coventry, Native American and Coventry history and artifacts, Stew and Story (Caprilands), and coming up, guided walks, Early Ministers of Coventry, and more. See the calendar of events in this newsletter and watch [facebook.com/coventryhistory](https://facebook.com/coventryhistory) for updates. The Executive Board members and volunteers have been doing a wonderful job, keep up the good work! Also, CHS has been awarded the residue of the Caprilands Estate to keep up Adelmia Simmons's legacy according to her wishes, to be in a separate account for that purpose.


### ConnCRIS


The State Historic Preservation Office has a new free statewide digital resource, the Connecticut Cultural Resource Information System, aka ConnCRIS, an interactive geospatial database at [conncris.ct.gov](https://conncris.ct.gov).


Descriptive information about known archaeological sites and historic buildings, structures, and objects are connected to a map with multiple, searchable layers. All historic resources documented through survey or historic designation are mapped with location points. Survey areas and historic district boundaries are also drawn. ConnCRIS allows access to above-ground, historic architectural resource data, such as State and National Register listed properties and a variety of map layers that can be turned on and off. No log-in, permission, or downloads are required, and a user-guide is available within the map application. A later full launch of ConnCRIS will include log-in access to view additional information. Contact Jenny Scofield [jenny.scofield@ct.gov](mailto:jenny.scofield@ct.gov) for more information.



## Upcoming Events

**Tag sale Sat May 6** We will hold a tag sale from 8-4 at the Strong Porter House Museum.  Books, antiques, historical and Caprilands items, tools, household items, and more will be sold. Got donations for our tag sale? Call Sue Way at 860-712-4278 to coordinate a drop off at the Strong Porter House before May 6.


**Early Ministers of Coventry Thurs May 18** See  page 1 for details about this free interesting program at First Congregational Church. Open to the public.

**Cemetery Tour Sat June 10** Join Town Historian  John Holmy for a guided walk. Watch for details for come. Raindate Sun June 11.

**Sundae on a Sunday June 18** (Father's Day) On Sunday June 18th we celebrate Father's Day with our annual Ice Cream Social, SUNDAY ON A SUNDAY! The 1825 Brick School, located at the corner of  Merrow Road and Goose Lane, will be open to visitors from 1-3pm, so come over and enjoy some ice cream! As usual, fathers get a complimentary sundae, while we ask a \$3 donation from others. Reservations not required, first come first served. Rain or shine, unless extreme weather.

**Appraisal Day Sat July 8** Are you a fan of Antiques Roadshow? Wonder if that dusty old thing in the corner has  any value, or even what it is? Join auctioneer RJ Weston at the Strong Porter House on Sat July 8 from 1-4pm to find out, and see what your neighbors bring. Maximum 3  appraisals per person, and cost is \$5 for each verbal appraisal. First come, first served, rain or shine.

## Member Appreciation Sun Aug 6

The Coventry Historical Society wants to show our appreciation to our volunteers and members who inspire  us to continue the work of the Society. Please be our guests at an outdoor gathering of members to socialize and enjoy refreshments at the Strong Porter House Museum from 3-5pm.

## Caprilands Style Luncheon Sat Aug 26 –

Watch for details about our 3<sup>rd</sup> annual event.

**Annual Meeting Sun Sept 17** – Watch for more information to come about our next annual meeting.

## Annual Stew and Story Returns

We were happy to be able to gather for our annual Stew and Story after cancelling our 2020, 2021 and 2022 events due to Covid social distancing concerns. It seems our guests were happy as well, as we had a record number of attendees who came to enjoy a variety of delicious homemade soups, stews, chowders, breads, desserts and drinks.



*Corned beef & cabbage stew*



Our guest speakers were former employees of Caprilands who shared their experiences working at that magical place during its heyday.



*Caprilands memorabilia*

## Archives Corner by Sue Way

### A Remarkable Coventry Village Collection

Over the last few years John and Bob Brainard have donated to CHS a collection of photos, diaries and documents that were left to them by their parents, Jesse and Suzanne (Welles) Brainard. A portion of this collection had been bequeathed to Sue by Alice (Coombs) Tisdale in 1967. Sue had managed Alice's affairs in her final years. Alice was the sister of Hattie Coombs. They were the daughters of Charles G. and Alice (Boynton) Coombs. Alice (Boynton) Coombs was the sister of Rachel Estella (Boynton) Wood (b.1861-d.1949). So Stella was Hattie and Alice's aunt. In 1878 Stella's parents, Norman and Rachel Boynton, retired from farming and built a house at 63 School Street. Their son Walter and daughter Estella lived there



*Rachel Estella Wood*

with them. After Stella married, she and her husband, Albert Wood, a shoemaker, lived with his mother at 1090 Main Street. Hattie and Alice grew up nearby off School Street in a house that is no longer standing. This area was called Boynton Village for many years. Hattie lived in her parents' house her entire life, and Alice moved to Prospect Street after she married Sam Tisdale late in life. These three women had no children of their own.



*Alice and Hattie Coombs on the left with their grandmother Rachel Boynton standing between them and her daughter Alice Boynton Coombs. Sitting on the right is Charles G. Coombs, father of Alice and Hattie, Carriage maker and photographer, and sitting in front of him is his mother, \_\_\_ Coombs.*



*Kingsbury Box Shop workers-back row- \_\_\_, Ella Thiem, Elsie Palmer, Alice Coombs, Nellie Albertine, Rose Albertine, Stella Wood (in the doorway), \_\_\_, Dewitt Kingsbury, Ed Stanley. Front row- \_\_\_, Ella Lloyd, \_\_\_*

Stella and Alice worked in the local mills, and Hattie became the town's Librarian. They were involved with the First Congregational Church and the South Coventry Grange. An Historical Committee was set up at the Booth & Dimock Library in July 1, 1941. George Robertson, Rachel Estella Wood, Maud Peterson, William Higgins, Hattie Coombs, Suzanne Welles and Charlotte Albertine were members of this committee that met at the library. Articles of incorporation of the Coventry Historical Society were signed July 9, 1945, in part so the Society could receive donations and a bequest from George Dudley Seymour. Hattie became the first Secretary for this early edition of the Coventry Historical Society, which did not survive for very long. As Secretary, Hattie was asked to store the donations of books and papers and account books from early Coventry businesses. After her death, those items were stored in the first Coventry Town Hall Records Vault (now the Visitor's Center) until the second edition of Coventry Historical Society was formed in 1962. Then the collection was moved to the Sprague House, our first headquarters, located at 2187 South Street, and finally to the Strong Porter Museum at 2382 South Street. This was the beginning of our Archive.

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### **Village Collection** (Cont'd from Page 5)

Stella and Hattie kept diaries that are full of the events in the lives of their families and Village residents (1889 – 1937). There are 10 diaries altogether. They also collected photographs of family and friends, and the social life of the day included a great deal of visiting. It had become the custom to exchange cabinet card photographs when paying a visit. This



custom may explain some of the more than 336 cabinet card photographs in this collection. Some of these photos were taken by Charles Coombs, but many were taken in Willimantic and elsewhere. In reviewing the diaries and the photographs it seems possible that at some point Hattie, Stella and Alice decided to make an effort to add photographs to this collection to further document life in Coventry Village as they knew it during their lifetimes. John Brainard has been sending this collection to us from his home in the Midwest.

Jesse and Sue (Welles) Brainard had a lifelong interest in Coventry history and did a great deal of research and writing on the subject. Alice (Coombs) Tisdale may have left this collection to Sue Brainard knowing she would try to preserve it. Jesse and Sue and their son John have added identifications to the backs of many of these photographs. They also compiled a list of the many vital records mentioned in Stella Wood's diaries and eventually passed their collection on to their four sons. John Brainard has also shared the images from his 554 Charles Coombs glass plate negatives with the town and with CHS. The glass plate negative collection also came to Suzanne Brainard through the will of Alice Coombs Tisdale. All those involved with this collection have opened a window on life in South Coventry Village

and allowed us to step back in time and imagine what life was like.

We will hope to create a list of the people identified in these pictures and a list of the people mentioned in the diaries so that you will be able to search for your family members or the people who lived in your house.

### **Brick School**

The Brick School, 951 Merrow Road, is open to the public on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sundays from 1-4 pm during the months of May to October. Stop by and learn about our one-room schoolhouse and what school was like in Coventry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.



### **Supporting CHS With a Legacy Gift**

Estate planning helps you protect the people and causes that are important to you. Please consider leaving a legacy gift to CHS as part of your estate plan. Your support will help sustain our research and programs for generations to come.

### **Find Us Online & On Facebook**

Make sure to visit and Like our Facebook page [facebook.com/coventryhistory/](https://www.facebook.com/coventryhistory/) and website [ctcoventryhistoricalsociety.dreamhosters.com](http://ctcoventryhistoricalsociety.dreamhosters.com) for lots of articles and information about Coventry's past, photos of items of historical interest, and occasional opportunities to offer an opinion about a "Whatsit" that's come our way.

## Recent Programs at CHS

### Taverns of Coventry

In January the Coventry Historical Society held an interesting talk on the 18th and 19th and some early 20th century taverns of Coventry and all their important functions in the life of the town and New England. You could find hospitality for travelers,



visitors, and church-goers, a place to hold court, get and send mail and

newspapers, discuss the news of the day, sign up for the militia, appear for training days, celebrate the ordination of a new pastor, attend a meeting of the Church Seating Committee, Sons of Liberty, the Committee of Correspondence or the Masons, and perhaps pay your taxes, rent a horse or wagon and buy supplies or get your horse shod where such services were supplied, and catch the local stagecoach. Who knew they were really such a center of activity? CHS Archivist Sue Way knew! Thank you to Sue for the presentation.

### **THE EARLY CHURCH AND MINISTERS OF COVENTRY**

**Thursday, May 18, 7–9 pm, First  
Congregational Church**

What were the first and second  
great awakenings?

Who was Lorenzo Dow?

What happened to First Church to  
cause the sanctuary to be closed  
for so long?

Come and find out the answers to  
these questions and more!

## Native American-Coventry History & Artifacts

In February the Coventry Historical Society held a well-attended program on Native American-Coventry History and a display of personal artifacts as well as those in the Society's collection. Attendees learned about the Native American artifacts donated to the Coventry Historical Society and collected by a local couple over many years, about local Native American history, and were able to see and handle a number of Native American artifacts going back



hundreds to thousands of years. Thanks to Dan Gorka and Jim Wicks for the presentation.

### **APPRAISAL DAY AT CHS**

**Saturday, July 8, 1-4pm,  
Strong Porter House Museum**

Think you might have a valuable  
antique?

Wonder what something you have  
actually was used for?

Auctioneer RJ Weston will provide  
verbal appraisals for \$5 each,  
maximum 3 items

First come first served, rain or shine!