

# Thomaston Historical Society

Spring Newsletter – May, 2024

## 1980 Maine State Prison Complex in Thomaston



## Celebrating 200 Years of Maine State Prison

When Maine became a state in 1820, it could no longer use the Massachusetts prisons. It opened its own state prison in Thomaston in July 1824 – 200 years ago this year. When the Thomaston Prison could no longer be upgraded any further to keep up with the demands, it was closed in 2002 and demolished. The new prison is in Warren. However, Thomaston is an important part of this history with the prison being here for 178 years. The Prison Store is still here on Main at the corner of Wadsworth St..

Maine is planning ways to celebrate this bicentennial and the Thomaston Historical Society will be helping. Our June program this year will show a 2002 video that was put together by the prison at the time the Thomaston Prison closed. Look for what will be in the July 4th parade. Also come and see our mini prison exhibit at the museum which was updated last year.

We are working with the Prison on other events. Join with us to celebrate this important history for the State and Thomaston.

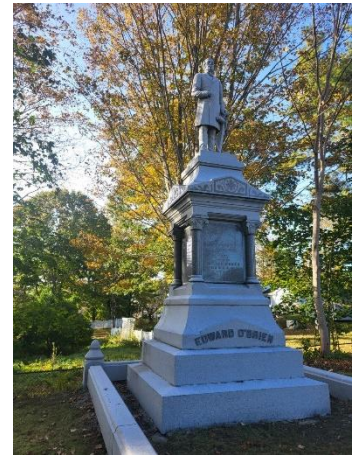
Susan Devlin, President and Curator

## Edward O'Brien Fund for the Deserving Poor

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We have been digging deeper into the large donation given by the descendants of Edward O'Brien, Thomaston's First Millionaire. We discovered that in 1878, he gave the town \$10,000, the interest to be used each year for selected deserving poor. Eventually, this was administered by the ministers of the Baptist and Episcopal Churches. However, during a recent financial crash, the principal was seriously affected. It is back up in value, but the interest is not yet high enough for practical donations each year. We are discussing with the O'Brien family what they think is the best path to proceed.

The photo to the right is the O'Brien Monument in the Elm Grove Cemetery. Board Member Ron Gamage worked with the family to get this cleaned



Susan Devlin, Curator

## Meet Larry Lentz and Chalen Mitchell – Two New Volunteers

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Both Larry and Chalen are relatively new residents in Thomaston and already active. Larry has volunteered to take on PR, starting with news releases this spring. Filling this vacant position will be a great relief as our president/curator has had this added role for many years. Chalen is interested in bringing back up our Facebook page and has the skills needed.



Both are interested in joining our board. Members will have a chance to meet them and vote on this at our June membership meeting. As our current Secretary, Aleta Kilborn needs to take a step back, Chalen would also become the Board's recording secretary.

Susan Devlin, President

## WE GET LETTERS, QUESTIONS, ETC.!!!

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Our Society gets all sorts of requests. Here are selections from a few received this year.

- "I'm grateful to be in touch about research on family members living in Thomaston in the 1800's and earlier. We live in Southern Maine and would be able and interested to come in person to search."
- "Hello, I'm wondering if you can help. We have a fancy gold pocket watch that is engraved "Geo W Tillson Thomaston, Maine 1881." Do you have access to any old records or family names to know if he or the last name was of any historical significance in your town?"
- "My grandfather was Oliver Fernald Cushing, born in Thomaston on March 19th, 1861, he died on March 17th, 1938. He was a physician who married my grandmother, Ethel Garland, on December 31st, 1925 and had two children, my mother Margorie and her younger sister Jean. My grandfather and my mother were raised at 5 Elliot Street.?" (We've arranged for them to see the house during their visit from the west coast.)
- "I am researching my great, great grandfather Samuel Patterson. He was a sea captain. His connection to Thomaston is his marriage in this town on August 30, 1834 to Mary Ann/Martha Webber."
- "I was wondering if you have any records, documentation, or information about Thomaston prison from the 1920's and '30s or if you can point me in the direction of those who do. I am working on a book about

a Black family from Washington County from the 18th century up until the 20th. One particular member of the family had a very difficult and tragic life. He was incarcerated in Windham and Thomaston several times, and each time escaped before being “hunted” and sent back to Thomaston”.

- “We purchased a home in Thomaston a couple of years ago. This “Key West House” is only 400 sq. ft., supposedly built in 1942. We are trying to find out the story of the builder and the house.”
- “Hello, I am a volunteer at the Marin History Museum in California and we have an historical postcard in our collection that pertains to your area. Would you be interested in a collections transfer of this photo of the Thomaston State Prison yard? If so, please let us know where we should send it.”

This is just a sampling of why it is interesting to volunteer as a helper at the society. Please do so!

Bill Gay, Vice President

## ***Full Slate of Programs Scheduled for 2023***

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Unless otherwise indicated, these programs will take place in the bottom of that the Federated Church at 7:00 pm, with easy access from the parking lot behind the church:

**Tues. May 21 – PENOBSCOT NATION: RECENT HISTORY OF NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT.** John Banks, Penobscot Nation’s Director of the Dept of Natural Resources, 1980-2021, will talk about their projects including their restoration/clean-up of the Penobscot River.

**Tues. June 18 – BRIEF ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING & VIDEO: THOMASTON PRISON: A LOOK AT ITS HISTORY (2002).** After a very brief review of last year’s and planned activities for this year and a vote on the 2024-2025 THS board. Following the meeting will be a video on the history of the prison in Thomaston. There will be guests to add commentary. This is our kick-off for the 200<sup>th</sup> prison anniversary.

**Sat. July 27 – KNOX MEMORIAL DAY.** The 10:30 AM annual remembrance service honoring the life of Henry Knox at his grave at the Thomaston Village Cemetery, followed by a celebration of his life at Montpelier.

**Tues. August 15 – THE ROLE OF RELIGION AT THE MAINE STATE PRISON IN THE 19TH CENTURY.** Sandra Hoekstra, Bookseller, will discuss how state-supported religion played a part in the lives of the inmates.

**Tues. September 10 – GENEALOGY - FINDING HIS FATHER'S ROOTS.** Jesse Casas will discuss how he determined the identity of his father's birth parents using family lore, paper trail, and DNA.

**Tues. October 8 – A TALE OF THREE PRIVIES.** I Archaeologist Lee Cranmer, will discuss the archeological excavation of privies on three diverse sites, an 18th century fort, a 19th century farmstead and a 19th century urban house.

## ***A little bit of Lime History***

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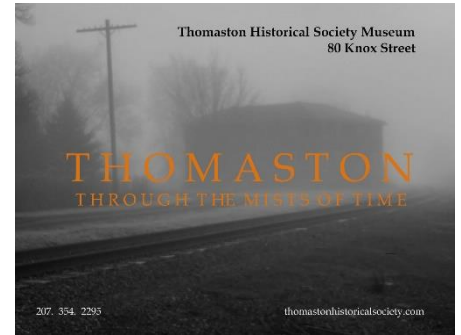
In 1843 Thomaston sent out a hundred cargoes of high-quality lime, more than two hundred cargoes of the burned rock the following year and even more in 1845. The trade reflected national economic prosperity and the need for buildings of all kinds. During the tragic Depression of 1857, the volume of trade fell off and unemployment became widespread on the Lime Coast. Only 41 schooners carried the goods that year. The tragic great fires in Boston and Chicago in 1872 greatly boosted the Maine lime and lumber economies. An 1873 fire in Belfast helped sustain the need for lime and lumber as well.

From [Ships, Seafaring and Society](#) by Timothy J. Runyan



## Hermes Creative Award

Alan Blake just received a Hermes Creative Gold award for the signage he made for the Historical Society. You can see it at the museum and on our satellite display at the town office. These awards are administered by the Association of Marketing and Communication Professionals (AMCP) and recognize outstanding work across industries, including individual communicators, independent agencies, media conglomerates, and Fortune 500 companies.



## WE NEED YOUR HELP!

Please renew your membership for the 2024/2025 year, due 7/1/2024, or join the Thomaston Historical Society if you are not a member. We need you!

Also, we are looking for volunteers from all walks of life to help in all areas of the organization. Volunteers are the key to our continuing success. Currently we are particularly looking for anyone interested in the areas of planning/designing new displays, helping with a fund-raising event, managing building and grounds projects, helping with the website, writing Publicity releases, designing Membership drives, or joining the Board.

If you want to explore possibilities for helping, email [info@ThomastonHistoricalSociety.com](mailto:info@ThomastonHistoricalSociety.com).

Thanks to our current Gold Business Members.

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