

Thomaston Historical Society

Spring Newsletter No. 54 – April 2021



During the pandemic we have received many inquiries and surprise donations. The one above is from the Maine State Prison Store. Learn more about this and other finds below.

What a challenging year. The museum is now open by appointment only and under safe conditions. We are having work sessions for volunteers, with a maximum of four, each working on separate projects with their own work space. As of April 7th, 25.1% of Maine citizens had been vaccinated – far more among seniors. We are cautiously planning to expand activities – more as decisions are made.

We will not have our annual, in person membership meeting this year, but would appreciate all of you who are members to vote for our 2021-2022 board, using the ballot accompanying this newsletter.

We can tell many are cleaning attics and basements – finding gems that make their way to the historical society. Others are getting to those family research projects that have been on the back burner – generating questions for us to help with. See the article below about some of these contacts.

Susan Devlin
President, Thomaston Historical Society

Help Restore a 19th Century Sleigh

The small sleigh in the picture on the cover of this newsletter was received this winter from the Maine State Prison Store. Along with it were runners from two other sleighs. As they were cleaning out a storage building for other use, we had to move it quickly. Thanks to John Fancy, it is stored in the Pollution Control Garage until it can be moved to a barn available at the end of April.

It is in great shape for 150 years old, it just needs some wood repair and paint. We are seeking help to complete this project. When it is done, it will welcome visitors just inside the front door of the museum.

We plan to auction off the extra runners. If you are interested, make us an offer!

Susan Devlin, Curator

Our Summer House Tour is a Go -- Safely

Last year's Summer House Tour has been re-scheduled, due to the COVID pandemic, to this June 26th!

The former Dunn and Elliott Sail Loft at 54 Water Street has been partially restored by Claire Priest and Marcus Rhineland. The historical restoration was painstakingly performed by Tim Hanley, a Wiscasset builder. The interior of the building still shows the original elements of the 1875 Sail Loft, including the eyes for stretching canvas sails and hanging a wood burning stove, hackmatack ships' knees, and a two-story outhouse. A Sail-making bench from the original sail loft will be on view, thanks to its generous donation by Ida Elliot, a descendant of one of the original owners.



The Dunn and Elliott Sail Loft was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in March of 2020.

After being owned by Snow Marine, Chris Biggart (now of Warren) converted the building into a residence, which is how Claire, her partner Marcus Rhineland, and Claire's two sons use the building. The restoration process was photo-documented by local historian Peggy McCrea, Marcus Rhineland and neighbors on Water Street. This documentation will be available to the Summer House Tour guests to view on computer film loops as part of the tour.

The House Tour will take place on Saturday, June 26 from 1-4 pm. Rain date will be Sunday, June 27. COVID protocols for this event include making reservations in advance by calling Mimi Zwick, Summer House Tour coordinator, at 354-7029. Up to 6 people will be allowed in every 15 minutes and may tour in a proscribed route at their leisure. Guests without a reservation may have to wait until slots are available. Masks and social distancing are mandatory. Claire and Marcus will be available to answer questions about the challenges they faced lifting the building, as the exterior walls had sunk into the ground, and having to pour a concrete slab under the entire building, in addition to restoring clapboards, windows and the cupola.

Light refreshments are included in the ticket price. Raffle prizes will be available as well. Tickets are \$10 for non-members and \$8 for members. All proceeds benefit the Thomaston Historical Society.

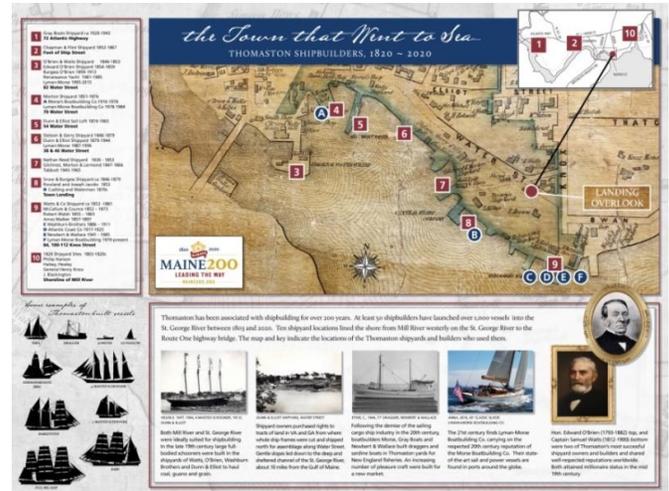
Mimi Zwick, House Tour Chair

200 Years of Boatbuilding in Thomaston – Plaque Dedication and Talk

We have finished all the components supported by the Maine 200 grant we received last year to celebrate Thomaston's history of ship building.

The **plaque**, shown at the right, will be installed this summer at the town landing, thanks to the Public Works Department. Shortly after Historian Peggy McCrea will give the talk, **Shipbuilding in Early Thomaston**, discussing Thomaston's early shipbuilding days and how nearly every resident in the village was connected to this important and necessary industry that put Thomaston on the map. As soon as the dates are firm we will let you know.

There are two more parts of this project. 2,500 copies of a **brochure** are sitting in boxes at the museum. You can get your copy at either the talk or dedication. Also, framed **posters** featuring 10 different shipbuilders are waiting at the museum. They will be touring the town office, library, schools and other venues. Visit the museum for an advanced peak!



Interesting Inquiries

During the year we got a lot of interesting inquiries. Below is a sample that shows the breadth of our society's impact. If you have any input to help with answers, let us know.

- The legend is that my family came over from Germany in the 1700s and settled around Thomaston. My maiden name is Havener; other Maine surnames include Cobb and Rust. One family home on Penobscot Bay now houses Down East Magazine. If you can connect me to Thomaston, I'd like to join to learn more about my ancestors and the countryside they dwelled in.
- My great grandfather, Truman Iron Sawyer, was born in 1856. His birth certificate records his birth location as Thomaston, at sea! Are there records that give more information such as the ship's name and Captain, where the ship had travelled to etc.?
- I am an underwater archaeologist for the state of South Carolina, inquiring about a shipwreck traced back to the George L. Abbott, built in East Thomaston in 1848. This is part of a NOAA Ocean Exploration and Research Grant. In addition to the sonar survey of Port Royal Sound, we have conducted background research on the many shipwrecks. Can you help? (Referred to Rockland.)
- Do you have copies of land grant deeds for 17th and 18th century settlers around Fort St. Georges (with a list of over 50 names)?
- We have a copy of a 1908 "Valedictory" speech by Jessie Flye for her St. George Grammar School graduation? It refers to the motto of Thomaston High School. Can you confirm that she went there?
- I am contacting you from Michigan. Over the course of years, I have pictures and memorabilia of Harry (1876-1930) and Elizabeth Tynan Wiggin (1875-1948) and their son, Vincent (1911-1987). Vincent was married to my aunt, Helen Boutin Wiggin. Vincent Seymore Wiggin died in South Thomaston on March 1, 1987. Does anyone have any information on this family as I would like to donate a beautiful framed portrait of baby Vincent to either the Thomaston or Wessaweskeag Historical Society? (The portrait was sent to Wessaweskeag and we await information from members).

Susan Devlin, Aleta Kilborn & Bill Gay

1957 Working the Blueberry season at Black & Gay

Picking blueberries was considered a good summer job for many local youths to earn money for fall school and personal expenses. The pickers headed to the fields between 6 and 7am from most of the local towns, having been picked up by trucks. In Thomaston, a pick up point was on the corner of Main St and Knox St. They were paid by how many bushel baskets they filled during the day. The fields were hot and sunny and each picker brought their own lunch. Black & Gay fields were mostly in Knox County, although there were a few somewhat further afield. Trucks fully-loaded with boxes of blueberries started to return from the many local fields around four in the afternoon.

At the Black & Gay factory, which was across the railroad tracks from the current Historical Society Museum, a shift of workers from high school students to local housewives were waiting to process the berries. This shift would often work until 11 or midnight.

The trucks would back up and unload the boxes. The berries would be dumped onto an 18 inch conveyer belt to the upper factory. A group of ladies would pick out any green berries, debris from the fields, etc. so that when the belt ended they were picked clean and could go into a large hopper to be cooked to the proper degree for canning. The cooking berries would be stirred by large wooden stirrers to keep the process going. Once ready, the berries were ladled into two sized sterilized cans, usually pint or gallon. This stage of the process was hot and steamy work, especially on a hot summer evening as there was no air conditioning in the factory.

Then the containers were conveyed to the sealing machine and labels affixed before being packed in cartons for shipping. Surprisingly, there was often a selection of different labels, such as Kid Glove, S.S. Pierce and B&G, that could be put on a can. Depending on which company made the order the retail selling price could vary up to a dollar or more. Once labeled and packed, the cartons were loaded aboard a railroad freight car that was on the siding next to the building and then shipped out.

Many a night I left the factory around 11 PM, hot and sweaty, and walked up Knox cooling off on the way home. The season generally was around a 3 week span.

Bill Gay, Vice President

Update: Thomaston Walking Tour via Smart Phones

We have made progress in writing up houses for the tour. We have expanded it to include a significant number of interesting structures on Main Street, Wadsworth Street, Water Street and Knox Street. Now we are working on getting then and now pictures – and a portrait of the earliest owner where we can.

Kathy Daley is searching our archives for old photos. Peter Jenks has offered to help take current photos. Peggy McCrae and Susan Devlin are working on text, and Kyle Barter will be putting it all together with the Vamonde application. We plan to confirm with current owners that they do not mind if their house front is shown on this tour.

As you can see there is a lot to do, but we hope to have at least part of the tour ready in late summer.

Susan Devlin and Kyle Barter

Please Help Us Stay Strong Financially– Renew or Join Now

It has been a difficult year financially without the support of our main fundraisers in 2020 (the Summer House Tour and Home for the Holidays). Thankfully with strong financial management in recent years, we do not have to touch our endowments funds until next month. However, it would be most helpful if members could renew soon for the 7/2021 to 7/2022 year. Adding a donation would be greatly appreciated. If you are not a member, please consider helping to support our activities.

Along with this newsletter is a membership renewal form – as well as an election ballot for our 2020-2021 board. Our new fiscal year starts July 1.

We also want to thank our Gold Business Members, shown below, for their support.

Sally Tabbutt Ploski, Membership, and Ron Gamage, Treasurer

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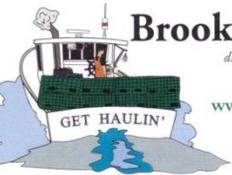
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