East School, Old Billerica Road
Originally built in 1863

The Preservationist

Newsletter of the Bedford Historical Society, Inc.
Bedford - Massachusetts

Founded in 1893

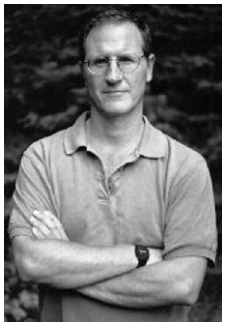
April 2011 Volume 119, Number 3

To The Rescue!

Don't miss this lecture.

Sunday, April 17, 2:30pm

First Church of Christ, 25 Great Road



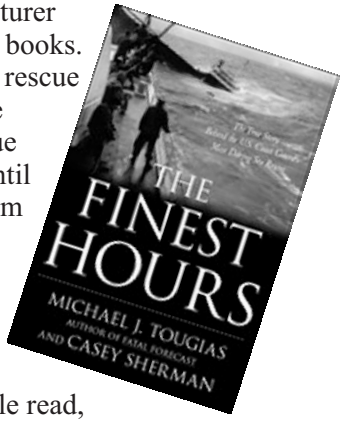
A true story about surviving disasters in the face of unbelievable odds

Imagine being stationed with the U.S. Coast Guard in Chatham when a distress call is received from two oil tankers that had ripped apart 20 miles offshore during a howling nor'easter.

How four U.S. Coast Guardsmen left the safety of their station on Cape Cod and ventured into the stormy waters in a 36-foot wooden boat to rescue the crews of the tankers Pendleton and Fort Mercier is the harrowing tale that will be recounted by author Michael J. Tougias for the Society's April 17th program meeting.

The meeting will be held on Sunday, April 17 at 2 p.m. in Fellowship Hall of the First Church of Christ, Congregational, 25 The Great Road. Refreshments will be served.

Mr. Tougias interviewed two of the four guardsmen who served aboard the rescue boat, as well as countless other people in writing his gripping account of the rescue mission in which many were saved, but others perished. His slideshow presentation, as well as his book, The Finest Hours: U.S. Coast Guard's Most Daring Sea Rescue, is a vivid recreation of the events of that night 60 years ago, and Tougias will talk about individuals who have survived disasters in the face of incredible odds.



Michael Tougias is a lecturer and award-winning author of 18 books. His story about the Coast Guard rescue was named to The Boston Globe best seller list. Another of his true adventure books, "Ten Hours Until Dawn: The True Story of Heroism and Tragedy Aboard the Can Do in the Blizzard of '78," was selected by the American Library Association as one of the "Top Books of the Year" and described as "a white knuckle read, the best book of its kind."

Tougias writes about his own experiences as well. He chronicled his misadventures at a remote Vermont cabin in his book, "There's a Porcupine in My Outhouse: Misadventures of a Mountain Man Wanna-be." This book won the Independent Publishers Association Award for "The Best Nature Book of the Year."

Carol Amick

Learn all about Rufus Porter at our May meeting

Professor David Jaffee PhD, of Bard College will be the guest speaker at the **Society's May 25th Annual Meeting** and Potluck Dinner, starting at 6:30 p.m. in Fellowship Hall of the First Church of Christ, Congregational. A brief business meeting to elect Society officers and directors for the 2011-2012 year will follow the potluck dinner.

Dr. Jaffee's presentation, "The Career of Rufus Porter: Artisan-Entrepreneur," will concentrate on Porter's career as portrait and mural painter, inventor, publicist, and habitual itinerant.

Rufus Porter was a nineteenth-century artist, teacher, musician, and inventor. He first painted portraits, but later painted decorative murals on the walls of dozens of homes throughout New England – including homes in Bedford such as the Stearns Mansion and the Job Lane House. He published six editions of Curious Arts and other manuals to promote a set of decorative artistic principles and to take advantage of America's new consumption of artistic objects, including paintings, that was part of a cultural revolution marking this period of American history.

The story about the Michael Bacon Home on 229 Old Billerica Road, with notes about his Mill on the Shawsheen

By: Bob Slechta, Board Member of the Bedford Historical Society

The Michael Bacon House, photo ca. 18oos.

Bedford's Michael Bacon III was born in England in 1639. In the following year, Michael II, his father, and his grandfather, Michael I, immigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony with their families. Michael I settled in Dedham and Michael II, first in Charlestown and then Woburn in 1644 where Michael III grew up.

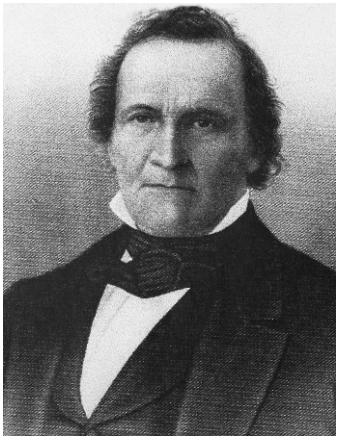
Michael II later acquired 200 acres of land in the northern part of Cambridge Farms (Lexington) and when he was 21, in 1660, Michael III married Sarah Richardson and built his first house on this land at about where present-day Rtes 4 & 225 and Rte 128 intersect. At about the same time, Michael's boyhood friend, Timothy Brooks, also married and together they became interested in building a corn or gristmill on the nearby Shawsheen River in southeastern Billerica about two miles northwest of where Michael lived. However, the proposed location was on part of a 500 acre wilderness land grant that had been made by the General Court to Rev. Jonathan Mitchell of Cambridge for settlement and development. It is believed that, in 1663, a lease arrangement was made for use of the land and the mill was built because it was at this time that the boundaries of the original grant were drawn to include the proposed mill site.

The Mill on the Shawsheen River as it appeared in this photo ca. late 1800s'

During the early years of the mill's operation, Michael continued to live on his father's land in Cambridge Farms and his first three children, all girls, were recorded as born there. The fourth child, Michael IV, born in 1668 has no birth record, but the fifth, Jonathan born in 1672 and all subsequent children were recorded as born in Billerica so Michael's family could have lived there as early as 1668, but certainly by 1671-72. Timothy Brooks also became a resident of Billerica at about the same time as his daughter was recorded as born there in 1670.

Cambridge records indicate that Michael was building a house in 1671 as the town had granted "Mitchell's tenant in Billerica" the right to dig clay in Cambridge for "bricks to make a stacke of chimnies" at his farm. If Michael had brought his family to Billerica as early as 1668, he would already have had a dwelling there and the brick chimneys would likely have been part of a new addition. As revealed in recent times by its architectural features, the structure of the right (east) half of the present house is distinctly older than that of the left (west) half and originally simply consisted of a keeping room and chamber above with the chimney and doorway on the left side as was common in earlier times. (Another similar example is Bedford's Job Lane House). When the second (west) half of the house was added is uncertain, but it might have been as early as 1671 or any time later. The age of the first (east) half might have been as early as 1668, the birth year of Michael IV, or perhaps even earlier.

Clare C. Leiby, late husband of the present owner of the house, Patricia Leiby, in his unpublished history of the house, argues for a possible much earlier date, before 1642. In that year, upon orders from the General Court to explore the wilderness area north of Cambridge for possible settlement, two appointed surveyors reported the presence of an abandoned trading post on the banks of the Shawsheen called the "Shawshin House". Mr. Leiby presents several lines of evidence indicating that the structure being added to by Michael in 1671 or earlier might well have been an addition to the old trading post which would place the date of the east side of his house before 1642. The expertise of Dr. Abbott Lowell Cummings of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities was called upon and he verified that the mode of construction of the east half of the house was consistent with that used in the first half of the 17th century.



Jonathan Bacon

In subsequent years, the Brooks-Bacon mill proved to be successful as evidenced by the town tax records, but, in 1680, Timothy Brooks' wife died and he moved to Swanzey, MA when he sold or transferred his interest in the mill to Michael. In 1682, Michael purchased the Mitchell grant of 500 acres with the farm and mill he had built on it for 200 pounds.

Prior to Michael's death in 1707, his second son,

The late Mimi Adler (right) leads the way along a marked path during a tour of the Bacon-Fitch-Clark mill site off Old Billerica Road.

Continued on pg. 3

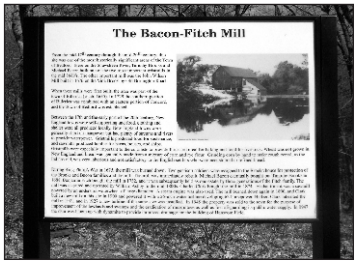
The Michael Bacon House, continued from pg 2

Jonathan, had purchased the mill and after his death, the house and farm were inherited by his youngest sons, Joseph and Benjamin I. After Joseph's marriage, Benjamin I remained the owner and at some time, probably when he was married in 1712, more rooms were added on the north side of the ground floor of the house making it into a "saltbox". Benjamin I died in 1727 and left the house to his son, Benjamin II who, when his son Benjamin III, married in 1766, raised the roof and added a second floor on the north side to accommodate his own family on the east side and that of Benjamin III on the west. Benjamin II died in 1791 and Benjamin IV, married in 1793, occupied the east part where his grandparents had lived. Benjamin IV died in 1839 and after that, the house was sold out of the Bacon family.

The Michael Bacon House as it is today, 2011

As to the mill of which Michael had become sole owner when Timothy Brooks moved away in 1680, it was sold by Michael to Benjamin Fitch (husband of the famed Miriam Gray of Andover, Witch of Shawsheen) in 1733. It remained in the Fitch family, passed on to Benjamin's son David I and then his grandson David II until it was sold to William Ashley in the mid 1800's when it was operated as a sawmill. It was purchased by Charles Clark in 1874 and then sold by the Clark family to the town of Bedford in 1945. The mill and dam were destroyed in 1947 to provide better drainage for the development of Hanscom Air Force Base near the headwaters of the Shawsheen.

While its history is complicated and somewhat controversial, the Michael Bacon house, whether it was first built in 1671 or before 1642, remains the oldest house in Bedford and possibly one of the few oldest in the country as the Fairbank House in Dedham (1638) is considered by authorities to be the oldest wood framed house in North America.



A plaque, erected by the Bedford Historic Preservation Commission, on the open space where the Mill was located until 1947, tells the story to visitors.

A few retaining walls and part of a concrete foundation is all there is left of the Mill today.

We have a gift for you!

Our society has been growing steadily. Not only did we receive more items for our collection, but also our membership has increased. Currently, we have more than 220 members; a nice number, but I would like to see that number grow even larger. There are plenty of incentives you can mention as to why friends and family should join us.

First of all, there are our six free, very professional lectures that the BHS offers every year. The presentations are varied and filled with history and anecdotes that always capture our interest. Look at the lectures we had just this year: Diane Rapaport's talk about "Early Colonial Slavery;" "A trip to the Shawsheen River," by Bob Rausco (see the follow-up article in this issue); David Kruh's revealing vision of the infamous Scolly Square; and the fascinating story by Ned Leeming of how he moved his house piece by piece.

Of course, we also offer a wide variety of merchandise that celebrates our town: books, posters, postcards, old Bedford maps, to name a few of many items for any taste.

In my opinion, the most important reason one should be a member is to support the Society's hard work to preserve the past for the future. Your gifts also help us do this. We love to hear from anyone who finds something hidden in the attic or sitting on a basement shelf, collecting dust.

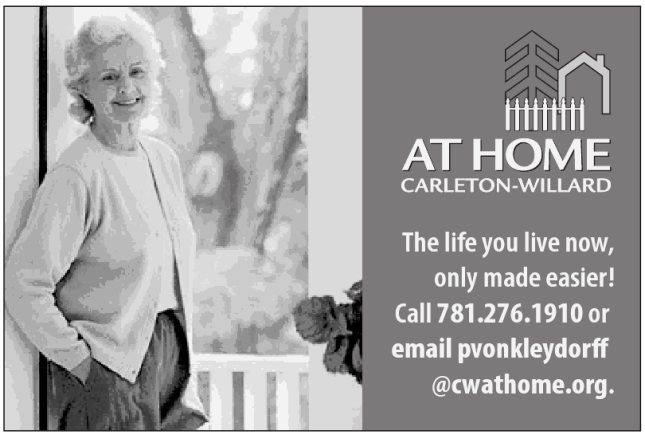
Therefore, I would encourage all members to spread the word: speak to friends, neighbors, businesses or work colleagues and ask them to join the Society as a member.

As an incentive, we would like to offer anyone of our members who brings in a new member, one of our beautiful trivets (see image on back of this newsletter). For those who join, we will present them with a copy of the book, "A Revolutionary Town," by Louise K. Brown. Ms. Brown was Bedford's Town Historian and the Society's curator for many years, and her book provides stimulating insights into this town's past.

So, let's start praising the Bedford Historical Society and bring interested friends to our next lecture. A summary of the fascinating topic is on this newsletter's cover. Come one; come all!

Thank you!
Jan van Steenwijk

Member of the Bedford Historical Society



Bedford High School Students Honored by the Bedford Historical Society.

l-r): Geena Chen, Emily Gao, Nicolas Plante and Ben Bosco; (back row, l-r): Bedford High History Department Chair Christine Butler, Teacher James Sunderland, and students Grace Huemme, Jack Bernardon, Paul Sobchenko and Dave Matthews.

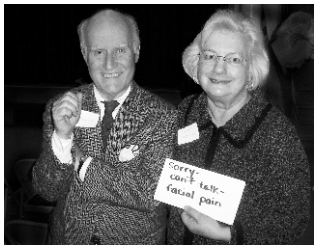
Eight remarkable Bedford High School students described their award-winning "History Day" projects at the Society's March program meeting. The Society presented each with a small check as a token of appreciation for their efforts.

With the guidance of Bedford History Department Chair Christine Butler and other Bedford High teachers, the students prepared unique projects, and were judged in Local, District and State competitions. Three projects, designed by eight students, earned State honors.

The award-winning students, and their projects, are:

- Ben Bosco, David Matthews and Nicolas Plante: A display observing the fortieth anniversary of the Lunar Landing. It placed first in its category at District and State.
- Jack Bernardon, Geena Chen, Emily Gao and Paul Sobchenko: A documentary entitled "Al Qaeda, A New Age in Terror" demonstrated their use of the internet. It garnered second place at District and State.
- Grace Huemme: A website entitled "Judicial Review" won first place at District and second place at State.

Another successful lecture!



Ned & Susan Leeming.

Thanks to a fabulous lecture by Ned Leeming, we all know now how to take our house apart and "just" move it somewhere else...!?

The BHS is fortunate to have our own Cecile Walker finding so many educational and entertaining lectures. This lecture, as many before, was almost sold out.

Please remember our next lecture and the Annual Meeting on May 25th.

Bob Slechta and Ned Leeming exchanging stories.

From the archives. What's it?

This item, although not quite antique, is rather heavy and made of brass. It has been sitting on our shelves since it was donated by Dr. A. Pfeiffer many years ago.

We received two correct answers on our last "What's it?" Dan Lacroix, captain of the Westford Minutemen wrote: *"Yes, a musket tool: Whisk & pick. The brush is to clean out the pan, and the pick is to clean out the touch hole in the side of the musket barrel."*

Jane More, former Head Guide, Lexington Historical Society wrote basically the same and added: *"It would have presumably been carried along by a soldier as part of his kit, so I'm sure by now one of your reenactors has probably filled you in."*

Actually, Jane, you came first. We thank you for your interest.

The photo shows the "kit" in its entirety.

Please help the Society: be a Volunteer!

As the Historical Society's 2010-2011 program year draws near its conclusion with the May annual meeting (Wednesday, May 25 at 6:30) to elect next year's crop of Society officers and members of the Board of Directors, the Society's Nominating Committee is beginning the task of identifying volunteers to help for next year.

Besides finding motivated members to serve as Officers and Board members, the Nominating Committee (Carol Amick, Wilma Johnson and Julie Turner) are looking for members interested in volunteering on one of the Society's subcommittees that together with the four Officers comprise the Executive Committee.

The Nominating Committee is always looking for new volunteers, who bring new ideas and enthusiasm to the work of the Society!

Meetings and Events Subcommittee includes program development, publicity, reception and hospitality.

Outreach and Support Subcommittee, whose activities include membership campaigns, creating and expanding alliances with community and business organizations and local schools, and outreach to Society members and new Bedford residents.

Merchandising and Sales Subcommittee, which identifies marketable products and marketing initiatives, and includes planning, staffing, and selling Society merchandise at community-sponsored events.

Fundraising Subcommittee, which plans special fundraising events.

Anyone interested in volunteering also can contact Carol Amick directly at 781-275-5278 or carol.amick@verizon.net.

Carol Amick

The Polluted Shawsheen River

By: Don Corey, Treasurer of the Bedford Historical Society.

The Shawsheen River has always been a major factor in Bedford's existence.

The "Shawsheen House" Indian trading post that existed by 1642 was the earliest recorded Colonial activity here.

Michael Bacon built his mill on the river in the mid-1660s, and both he and Timothy Brooks had settled along the river early in the 1670s. The Bacon-Fitch Mill and the nearby Wilson Mill on Vine Brook (a tributary to the Shawsheen River) were crucial to Bedford's growth for centuries until the development of steam engines. In recent years the town has installed historic signs at both mill sites, and this year an Eagle Scout candidate, Jeremy Poe, will be working on trail improvements at the Bacon-Fitch Mill site.

The Shawsheen river next to Stop & Shop - photo JvS April 2011

Bedford's stewardship of the river since the mid-20th century leaves a lot to be desired. After World War II, the town acquired the historic Bacon-Fitch Mill and demolished it, dynamiting out the dam to reduce flooding upstream. Shortly thereafter the town approved development of the Great Road Shopping Center and surrounding commercial properties, which involved filling of wetlands all along the river that hugely exacerbated flooding problems. Many residents may recall the auto left in the Stop & Shop parking lot (originally wetlands) during heavy rains last spring where the Shawsheen River had flooded up to its windows.

In recent years, thoughtless people using the commercial area have contributed to trashing of that section of the river. The following article is reprinted with permission from The Shawsheen Trib, the newsletter of the Shawsheen River Watershed Association (SWRA). The program by that group at one of our programs last fall, highlighting the history and beauty of the river, was very well attended and received.

"During the first week of May 2010, I wrote a description of a trip I made ... on the first section of the Shawsheen River with these words:

"*One look at the river at the put-in made it clear that a season-long, concerted cleanup effort was needed there. If we had made any effort to clean the area, our boats would have been full before we'd gone a hundred feet. That part of the river looks worse than the Bayou in Lawrence did before we started working there. It is truly a shame what continues to happen to the Shawsheen River in Bedford."*

In July of this year, six cleanups were conducted in that section of the river. The effort will continue through August, I'm sure, but we have made tremendous headway. We have paid $445 to We Get Rid Of It (WGROI) to haul away three pickup-beds of assorted trash, and we have filled our garbage bins with the take every week. In the first two cleanups, we hauled out the standard stuff: a metal grass catcher from a contractor's mower, tires, lumber, beverage containers, plastic bags, socks, shopping carts, miscellaneous metal rusted pipes, rods, bolts and nuts.

In the other four cleanups, we found little more than plastic bags and glass bottles. This site will forever be associated with plastic bags and the beverage containers. In fact, the bottom of the river was paved with bottles and plastic bags in uncountable numbers. The plastic bags came from the grocery and hardware stores as well as the restaurants served by the ocean of pavement that is the loading ramp for trash in the river at the Great Road Plaza....

Given the absence of a barrier between the river and the parking, it seems inevitable that this section is doomed to constant trashing. ***What would it take to get a chain-link fence installed at the edge of the parking lot?*** It would stop the plastic bags dropped in the parking lot as well as any other debris from that vast sheet of concrete. Maybe we could get a sympathetic fence installer to put one in at cost and write it off as a tax-deductible donation to the SWRA. Then we would have to get the Great Road Plaza owner to agree to let the fence proceed, as well as the Bedford Conservation Commission's permission.

Perhaps our members can let the Selectmen, Planning Board and Conservation Commission know that we care about the river and request that they develop plans to protect this section of our historic river.

Site of he Shawsheen House. The original house was built in 1642, as a trading post for fur traders

The Preservationist

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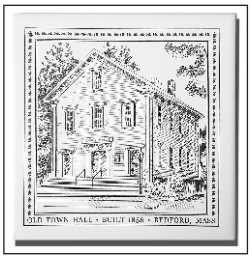
Help us to Preserve the History of Bedford's Past. Join the Society.

The Bedford Historical Society was founded in 1893 - Our Website: www.bedfordmahistory.org

We have many attractive items for sale.
Please visit our website, or come to our office.



Old Town Hall Trivit

Commemorative plate with Bedford images

Bedford Flag - 12x12 inches, a perfect gift - or for your own desk.

Membership Application/Renewal

Please join us - and support our heritage!

Name:_____

Address:_____

City/Town:_____

State:_____Zip:_____

Phone:_____

Email:_____

Dues

_ Student:	$ 15.00
_ Single:	$ 25.00
_ Couple or Family:	$ 45.00
_ Life - Single:	$250.00
_ Life - Couple:	$450.00

Supporting or Business:

_Contributing:	$100.00
_ Patron:	$175.00
_ Benefactor:	$300.00

Amount enclosed: $_____

Please send check to:
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2 Mudge Way, Bedford, MA 01730-2138

About this Newsletter: Layout and production, Jan van Steenwijk
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