Honoring His Memory

Minuteman Captain Jonathan Willson was a true patriot. He and his neighbors on Old Billerica Road and Page Road, including Sergeant Christopher Page, Cornet Nathaniel Page, the Maxwells, the Bacons and others, all answered the call on April 19, 1775. Captain Willson was killed by British flankers near Brooks Tavern in Lincoln during the British retreat along Battle Road.

Captain Willson spelled his name with two "L"s. His name in Bedford's Vital Records and on his gravestone in the Old Burying Ground is spelled with two "L"s. When the town decided in 1939 to name the park at the intersection of The Great Road, Concord Road and North Road in his honor, the plan presented to Town Meeting had his name spelled correctly. The bronze plaque on the boulder in the park has his name spelled correctly. Regrettably, both the Town Warrant article seeking approval of that plan and the report of Town Meeting adopting the plan had his name spelled wrong - with only one "L". For the last 75 years, the Town has perpetuated that spelling error with all of its subsequent actions involving the park.

The 1939 plan recently surfaced at DPW, and GIS Analyst Chris Nelson asked me about the discrepancy. I was aware that Bedford historians had been troubled about this error for years, so Chris and I set out on a mission. The Historic Preservation Commission discussed this matter and unanimously agreed that the landmark named to honor Captain Jonathan Willson should at least have his name spelled right. At a meeting last fall, the Selectmen agreed. Henceforth, town maps and other documentary records are being corrected appropriately.

So this spring plan to join us for Pole Capping at Willson Park to truly honor his memory!

Don Corey, president

earnest: more people were killed and wounded along this stretch of road in Lincoln than at the Lexington Green and Concord's North Bridge combined. It was here that the events of the day boiled over and passed the point of no return."

Mr. Wiggins says that the Revolutionary War farmers provide a composite glimpse of life at the time – puncturing the myth of the poor, subsistence farmer and highlighting the amount of mobility during colonial times and the interconnectedness of colonial communities. He noted that “colonial people got around almost as much as people do today!”

Mr. Wiggins describes himself as a businessman whose career has been in the medical and life sciences areas, but he has become immersed in history through his “Embattled Farmers” research and as a member of the Lincoln Minute Men, and as a volunteer at Minute Man National Historical Park. He also is a past Executive Director of the Bostonian Society, which maintains the Old State House.
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HELP WANTED!!!

The Bedford Flag, a proud symbol of our town
and a indispensable icon for the BHS

The merchandise offered for sale by Society includes small cloth copies of the Bedford Flag – complete with silver fringes. The flags have become very popular with Hanscom AFB personnel and VA Hospital personnel as gifts for people moving to new duty stations or retiring.

The flags are assembled by hand (primarily by Barbara Hitchcock and Jan van Steenwijk), and Ruth Beauchesne has been serging the flag fabric that has been patiently cut by Heather and David Pullen. However, help is urgently needed from someone with the right skills and tools.

The last piece of fabric we have for the flags is 56” wide x 92” long, and it must be cut into pieces that are exactly 11” x 11” and perfectly square. Otherwise the silkscreen printers cannot guarantee that the printed images of the flag on each side will be properly aligned.

If anyone would be willing to cut this fabric, it would be greatly appreciated. Please contact the office [info@bedfordmahistory.org or 781-275-7276] and leave a message. Thank You!

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201 Hartwell Road, Bedford, MA - 781-275-2545
Celebrating 70 years of selling the freshest eggs in Bedford!
Jack the Giant Killer...

Sometimes even seasoned Bedford historians are surprised when a bit of lost Bedford lore resurfaces. This was the case last month when the Society received an email from a gentleman named David Murray, who was looking for information about his father, Gillis Murray, who recently passed away. Gillis was the son of a prominent Cambridge manufacturer and grew up here in Bedford during the 1930s and 40s. The Murrays lived in an old farm house on Wilson Road, still known as the Wilson Farm, and David was hoping to confirm and expand on an intriguing story from his father's past that has significance well beyond Bedford.

According to David, Gillis Murray and his family were the final caretakers of the famous sled dog, Jack the Giant Killer. Jack, a Labrador-Newfoundland mix, was a lead sled dog on Admiral Richard E. Byrd's Second Antarctic Expedition. During the expedition, Jack earned the nickname “Giant Killer” because of his toughness and independence, and because he possessed the uncanny ability to lead his sled safely along the edge of dangerous crevasses, saving the members of the expedition on several occasions. Jack was so beloved that Stuart Paine, in charge of the dog teams for the expedition, published a book called The Long Whip: The Story of a Great Husky detailing the exploits of this remarkable dog. Unlike many of the expedition's other sled dogs who did not make it back to the United States, Jack received a ticker tape parade on Fifth Avenue and Paine made sure Jack was with him when he returned home to Shankshassick, his family's farm in Durham, New Hampshire.

It is here that the story becomes a bit blurred. Stuart Paine, at some point after his return from the expedition, left New Hampshire to take a job in Boston. Jack, being of a large and energetic working breed, would have found city life difficult, so one can imagine that Paine wanted to find some place for Jack nearby. The Murray's Bedford farm offered just the right combination of close proximity to Boston and open space and fresh air that Paine knew his friend Jack deserved. All that we currently know is that Jack lived with the Murrays on the Wilson Farm for five years, until he died on April 11, 1940. It is said that Admiral Byrd wrote a eulogy for Jack that was published in many newspapers and that Jack was buried on Paine's family farm.

In order to fill in some of the gaps in this story, we contacted the Durham Historical Society for information about the Shankshassick Farm that is still owned by Sally Paine Ford, Stuart Paine's niece. Sally has provided some additional details. She confirmed that when Jack died, Paine collected the dog's remains from Bedford and drove them to Shankshassick Farm. She recounts that her grandmother had planned on returning to New Hampshire with Paine prior to Jack's death, and that Paine asked if she would find riding with Jack's remains too distressing. Sally claims that she replied, “It would be an honor to ride with you and Jack.” Sally also confirmed that Jack's final resting place is indeed on the Shankshassick Farm.

Sally Paine Ford promises that there is much more to this story, and we are looking forward to including it among other fascinating stories from Bedford's past.
Renewing the Old...

Bedford takes pride in its historic cemeteries, and substantial progress has been made in preserving both the 1729 Old Burying Ground (OBG) and 1849 Shawsheen Cemetery in recent times.

Work at the OBG started several decades ago when John Brown, Bob Slechta, Helen Nowers, Eunice Puzzo and Dana Morse became interested in surveying and mapping the OBG and creating databases of the people buried there with dates, burial locations, epitaphs, and other useful information. Upon completion of that mission, they researched and corrected the records of Revolutionary War soldiers buried there; the bronze plaque mounted near the Springs Road entrance reflects their work (see photo). The Historic Preservation Commission then succeeded in obtaining grants from the Mass. Hist. Comm.: first, for preparation of a Preservation Plan and then, two (2) construction grants to repair and reset broken and fallen gravestones and to reinforce the tombs. Community Preservation funds were used to match the grants and to complete that work. Subsequently, John Brown memorial funds were donated to the town by the Historical Society to reset many other stones that were leaning or improperly set. Finally, Bob Slechta organized a group of volunteers that cleaned moss, lichens and dirt off the gravestones to make them legible. The oldest stone in the OBG, that of Katherine Lane who died in April 1731, that had become almost illegible now looks as if it was just carved. Authorities on the subject who have visited many historic cemeteries agree that Bedford's OBG is among the best preserved.

One final phase of the project was the reconstruction of the south wall, adjacent to the residence at 5 Springs Road. That wall formerly consisted of piled fieldstones. Last fall DPW had a skilled contractor rebuild it as a mortared wall (similar to the west wall along Springs Road). This required special care and equipment so as not to disturb the graves and gravestones just inside that wall. In the process of establishing the base of the wall, clumps of invasive Japanese knotweed that had become established were uprooted and removed.

Bedford recently entered into a similar contract to prepare a Preservation Plan for Shawsheen Cemetery. The contractor, Ivan Myjer, previously prepared the Plan for the OBG. Work commenced just before this winter's heavy weather set in and will be completed before June 30.

Don Corey

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Visit our website: www.bedfordmahistory.org
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“We Don’t Make History...
We Keep It Alive!!”

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