Utah Beach to Paris (letters home)

World War II has been very much on our minds because of Ken Burns’ recent television series. This month’s meeting Historical Society meeting continues the tale as we hear from Burton William Gregg of Weston, who tells a sweeping story with photos and quotes from letters.

Wednesday, October 24, 7:30 p.m.
Congregational Church
25 The Great Road, Bedford
Free and open to all
Please bring your friends!

Bedford Flag postage stamps

Custom US postage stamps bearing a full-color photograph of the Bedford Flag are now available for purchase from the Society. In 2006 the US Postal Service announced a program would let members of the public design custom postage stamps using their own photographs. These are real stamps, good for first-class postage of 41¢. We recently decided to take advantage of this program, so Society member Jan van Steenwijk provided a photograph of the true, original Bedford Flag and did the design work. The stamps come in sheets of twenty and are available for $20 a sheet ($18 member price).

These stamps, along with a selection of our other Bedford history products, will be available for purchase at our October 24 meeting. Don’t miss this chance to begin Christmas shopping early.

Please visit our web site: www.bedfordmahistory.org
New members join us

We are delighted to announce that we have gained three new members in the last month. Cecilia Wisentaner accompanied her friend Jacqueline Curley to our September meeting and joined us that evening. Katherine and Lawrence Graff joined following a talk on the history of Bedford given by Bob Slechta and Don Corey at Carleton-Willard Village. Welcome, all!

Christmas party set for Sunday, December 16

Our annual Christmas party is set for the early evening of Sunday, December 16. Once again, Judy and Nat Brown will be our hosts at the newly enlarged New England Nurseries. More details about the party will be given in November’s newsletter.

Our officer and directors have voted to try a new plan this year and see how it suits everyone. The Society will purchase all the refreshments to spare the guests the work of preparing goodies at a time of year when our social schedules are very full. We think this will make it easy for our members and friends just to drop by, relax, and have a good time socializing.

We are looking for someone to be our Party Czar and take charge of setup and cleanup for the party. The task will be simpler this year because the new catering plan will the whole process much easier. If you are willing to be our Party Czar or Czarina please give our office a call.
Annual Giving continues

The Society approaches the kick-off of its Annual Giving Campaign, we are grateful for the generous continuing contributions from members and friends. Carleton-Willard Village sent another donation from residents who participated in a recent bus tour of historic Bedford led by Society member, Carleton-Willard resident, and enthusiastic cyclist Bob Sawyer. Other recent contributors include

Rogger and Caro Little  
John and Bonnie Croteau  
Brown and Lois Pulliam  
Miriam Chrisman

Every gift helps us accomplish our mission of preserving Bedford’s historic and cultural resources for the benefit of the whole community.

Change of date for April meeting

Stone wall expert Robert M. Thorson will be our final speaker for this year’s lecture series on Bedford and local history. We know that Prof. Thorson is sure to draw a crowd and we want to make it possible for as many people as possible to attend. At our request he has graciously agreed to give his talk on a Sunday afternoon rather than on Wednesday, April 23, as originally planned. The new date:

Sunday, April 13, at 2 PM  
Congregational Church, 25 The Great Road

We’ll give reminders as the date approaches. Please mark your calendar now.

Correction

We regret to state that last month’s article on family papers contained errors. John Brown was not involved in finding or organizing the Lane family papers. We offer our sincere apologies to him and to our readers.

Archives wish list

We get far too many of ’em at home but none at our office. Do you have a current local telephone book that you could donate to the Archives? The one we’re using is so old that our recycling bin might be embarrassed to receive it. A 2007 phone book with both white and yellow pages would be very helpful to us. Please call the office at 781-275-1212 ext. 140 if you can help. We’d be glad to pick it up at your home.
The Bedford Charter

On October 1 the Society formally presented the Bedford Selectmen with a full-size, framed photographic reproduction of the town’s Act of Incorporation (see photos on pages 3 and 8.). This is the document, written in archaic script on a long piece of parchment, by which the legislature of the Massachusetts Bay Colony carved Bedford out of portions of Concord and Billerica on September 23, 1729. The story of how this precious piece of parchment came to be is worth telling.

In 1635 the area of Musketaquid, which became Concord, had been established as the first inland town in Massachusetts. It was originally a square, six miles on each side, that included what is now the southern portion of Bedford and several other modern towns. In 1655 the General Court granted permission for Billerica to become a town. That town lay on both sides of the Concord River and along the Shawsheen River north of the Concord Line. It included what is now the northern portion of Bedford as well as several other modern towns.

By the 1720s about 20 families had settled in south Billerica and about the same number in the east part of Concord. In 1728 those citizens petitioned for the formation of a new town, primarily because of the difficulty of traveling long distances to their places of worship in the centers of their respective towns. The Concord petition reads in part as follows: “In the extreme difficult seasons of heat and cold we were ready to say of the Sabbath; ‘Behold what a weariness is it.’ The extraordinary expenses we have in transporting and refreshing ourselves and families on the Sabbath has added to our burden.”

Concord readily approved the petition but Billerica contested the matter because they did not want to lose several important families as well as the important Bacon and Wilson mills. The matter was brought to the General Court, which decided in favor of the petitioners. So, on September 23, 1729, Bedford was established as a new town. Its name is believed to be derived from Bedfordshire, England, home of the Rev. Peter Buckley, a leading and much-loved settler of Concord and its first minister.

The parchment Act of Incorporation, sometimes called the Bedford Charter, is kept with other ancient official records in the Massachusetts Archives. It is, in effect, Bedford’s Declaration of Independence from its mother towns. During Bedford’s 275th anniversary celebration in 2004 the Bedford Historical Society contacted the State Archives for permission to view the Act. There were no known photographs it, and it probably had not seen the light of day for a century or more. The response from the State Archives was in essence that the document was too fragile for the town to see it; the document needed conservation if it was to survive; and the State Archives did not have money in their budget to have the conservation work done.

Consequently, the Historical Society contacted Doreen Tremblay, Town Clerk, and Meredith McCulloch, then Director of the Bedford Free Public Library, to ask for assistance in preserving the Act. Each organization contributed one-third of the several thousand dollars needed to have the document conserved by the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) in Andover, MA. Although the Society was not allowed to take custody of the document several members did have the pleasure of being able to visit NEDCC and see it in person before it was returned to its resting place.

After NEDCC completed the work they took several high-resolution photographs of both sides of the document and provided color film positives to the Society. In order to make Bedford’s founding document available to the public the Society arranged for high-quality prints to be made by photographer and Society Director Jan van Steenwijk. We now offer for sale two versions, one with the front of the Act, a transcription of the text, and signatures on the back, and the other with the front of the document only. For information please call our office at 781-275-1212 ext. 140 or visit our web site, bedfordmahistory.org.

From our collections: An early foot warmer. Fill it with hot coals and carry it to your unheated church, then you’ll be able to concentrate on the sermon.
The Preservationist October 2007

The Parkers of Old Billerica Road

The section of Old Billerica Road from #229, the Michael Bacon House, through #301, the El-Wil Farm House, was recently named to the National Register of Historic Places. For one period of its history almost all of the land on both sides of our new Historic District was owned by members of the Parker family.

The story of Old Billerica Road was, for a time, the story of the Parker family. Four siblings from Boston – Arthur Hamilton Parker, Frederic Parker, Francis Stanley Parker, and Eleanor S. Parker – decided around the turn of the last century to make Old Billerica Road in Bedford their home.

The first Parkers to settle in Bedford were Arthur and his brother Frederic, along Frederic’s wife Mary McBurney Parker and their first three oldest children, Frederic Jr., Elizabeth, and Henry. In the reminiscences she later wrote for her children Mary McBurney Parker tells how it came about. She writes, “Uncle Arthur was looking everywhere at this time [the early 1890s] to buy a farm and Papa decided to buy some land near him too. We… finally decided to buy two farms in Bedford – Uncle Arthur taking one side of the road with a small house and large farm and we, the other side with a large house and no farm. Just opposite our house was a large cow barn where Uncle A. kept a lot of cows…” The house and stables that Arthur bought are now known as 278A and 278B Old Billerica Road. Frederic and Mary and their children moved into what is now 261 Old Billerica Road, well known to us as the Jonathan Wilson homestead.

Mary did not seem to be aware of her new home’s history as the homestead of Bedford’s captain of militia. They dubbed it “Hill House” and she saw it in very practical terms. “We had to do a great deal to the house which was merely a modern New England farm house, very ugly… There were of course no bathrooms in the house… there was a round tin tub in the parlor, used very seldom I imagine. Uncle Arthur moved out to Bedford in the autumn of 1893 and lived in our house – no heat! …We put in two bathrooms, painted and papered everything.”

Four years later, another Parker brother joined the ménage. She writes, “Uncle Frank and Aunt H. decided to build a house out here… and moved out in the autumn of 1989.” These were Francis, his wife Harriet Amory Anderson Parker, and their sons John and William Amory Parker. The home they built is now 251B Old Billerica Road. The fourth Parker sibling, Eleanor S. Parker, bought part of the Michael Bacon House at 229 Old Bedford Road and eventually moved to Bedford where she lived, at different times, in 251C and 251A Old Billerica Road.

Mary wrote of her children’s childhood and youth as “a very happy time.” There was much for the children to enjoy, and much for the grownups to do. Arthur ran a farm and raised cows and champion racehorses. Mary’s husband Frederic “built the greenhouses [on what is now the site of Bedfordshire Village], and grew lettuce and cucumbers for market, sending them to Boston by team of horses in every kind of weather.” Frank “had a large stable, a greenhouse attached, and several good horses and a very stylish coachman.” Mary’s fourth child, also named Mary, “was born in 1899, and a very good baby.” Summers were spent with the Parker grandparents in Nahant.

The four Parker siblings made many purchases of land and houses along Old Billerica Road so that by 1911 they owned more than 350 acres, including almost everything in what has become the Historic District and a number of properties outside it. In addition to their homes they also owned 167 OBR; 242 OBR (since demolished), and both halves of the Michael Bacon house. They built 301 OBR, the El-Will Farmhouse; and 251A, 251B, and 251C OBR.

Clippings in the scrapbooks of Charles Jenks report many doings of the family. Shawsheen River Farm offers $35 in gold to be awarded as prizes in a turkey raising contest at the Grange Fair. Arthur’s barn suffers a disastrous fire in 1915. Sadly, Frank’s obituary appears in 1916.

The year 1917 was a busy one for the family. Banns were announced for the wedding of Mary’s daughter Elizabeth to Jesse Holbrook Philbin. Later that year the younger daughter, Mary, became a debutant in Boston. But the solemn events of the Great War also overtook the family that year, with Mary’s son Frederic Jr. and nephew William entering military service. Son Henry and nephew John later joined as well.

The younger Mary seems to have been the Belle of Bedford. A photograph shows her at age 12 or 13, accompanied by a chauffeur, riding in a float for Bedford Old Home Week (see photo, page 6.) After making her Society debut she entered into a variety of charitable activities. She became co-chair of a War Savings Stamp drive, helped raise vegetables for a Beverly hospital, worked for the YWCA in Boston, served on a committee for a Patriotic Field Day, and...
joined an organization of socially prominent ladies known as the 1918 Sewing Circle. When the war ended she became engaged to Henry Parsons King of Boston, who had given up his place at Harvard to join the military. Their wedding at the Unitarian Church in Bedford was attended by many prominent guests from Boston and New York.

Gradually the Parker family sold their holdings on Old Billerica Road, Arthur in 1921, Francis’s widow in 1932, Eleanor in 1933, and Frederic in 1937. The Parkers faded from Bedford’s view but they are not forgotten.

Sources

“Shawsheen River Farm,” the reminiscences of Mary McBurney Parker, donated to the Bedford Historical Society by Mary Waters Shepley via Miriam Chrisman.

National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form: Old Billerica Road Historic District, prepared by Martha Lyon.

Tax-free giving through your IRA

A special tax act makes it possible for you, if you meet certain qualifications, to donate money from your IRA directly to a qualified public charity such as the Bedford Historical Society without paying taxes on the donated funds. This program is currently scheduled to end at the close of 2007. You must act now to take advantage of the opportunity.

The Pension Protection Act of 2006 created this program. If you are at least 70-1/2 years old and have an Individual Retirement Account (IRA), you may make a tax-exempt donation of up to $100,000 from your IRA to an eligible charity. Please note that the donation must be made directly from your IRA account to the charity so that it is not counted as part of your income. You should ask your IRA Administrator to make a money transfer directly to the charity.

This form of charitable giving provides you with several benefits:
- You can support your favorite charities now with an easy transfer from your IRA.
- You can use the donation to satisfy the annual minimum distribution requirement.
- You pay no taxes on the distribution.
- The distribution is excluded from your gross income for tax purposes.
- You can obtain tax benefits even if you do not itemize your deductions when paying taxes.

You know that assets you hold in a traditional IRA are subject to income tax when you or your survivors make withdrawals, and both traditional and Roth IRAs may also be subject to estate tax if left to loved ones other than your spouse. For that reason your IRA could be an excellent choice for funding charitable gifts. Some of the Society’s members did take advantage of this program during last year’s Annual Giving fund drive and can recommend it. This year’s drive will begin soon. We urge you to consult your tax advisor now to see how you can benefit from this program before the window of opportunity closes.

Membership Application and Renewal Form

This is (please check one):
___ A new membership
___ A renewal
___ A gift subscription

Name:____________________________________
Address:__________________________________
________________________________________
City: _____________________________________
State:_______________________  Zip: _________
Phone: ___________________________________
Email:____________________________________

Dues (please check one):
___ Student: $3.00
___ Individual: $10.00
___ Couple or Family: $15.00
___ Supporting or Business: $50.00
___ Patron: $250.00
___ Life – Individual: $150.00
___ Life – Couple: $200.00

Donation
I would like to contribute the following amount to aid the Society: $ ____________

Total enclosed: $ ___________________
Are your dues up to date? Please check the mailing label for your membership status.

The Bedford Historical Society presents a framed copy of the town’s Act of Incorporation to the Selectmen. (Left to right) Society Director Jan van Steenwijk, Town Manager Rick Reed, and Selectmen Gordon Feltman, Angelo Colao, Mark Siegenthaler, and Sheldon Moll. See story, page 4.