Strange Things Happen!

Last month's mailing of the Preservationist turned out to be a bit of a disaster. With Bedford's Post Office in limbo, bulk mailings are now delivered to Burlington, from where they are sent to Boston for sorting and then returned for delivery. However, by the day of our March 23 meeting very few had been delivered, and many were never delivered. A second printing was ordered and sent to Bedford residents at month end, which coincided with the Post Office's 3-week late delivery of the first mailing to some residents. Alternate arrangements are in place to prevent this situation from reoccurring.

With the Society's newly designed website, it is now very easy to access and read the Preservationist online. An email reminder will be sent out after each Preservationist has been uploaded to the website. For any of you who prefer to save trees and not have a hard copy of the Preservationist mailed to you, please contact the office and your name will be taken off the newsletter mailing list.

FAMILY TREES

Doris Webber's comments at the last meeting about the Webber connection in the extraordinary Coast Guard rescue in 1952 – now a movie “The Finest Hours” - prompted Carol Amick's article in this month's Preservationist. I'm sure you'll enjoy it as much as I have. It prompted a genealogy search to find the specific relationship of Bernie Webber of Coast Guard fame with the local Webbers – not an easy task as the Webber family tree is pretty impressive. He's closely related and most probably in the same line as Doris' late husband, Abbott Reed Webber, but time constraints required that we leave it there.

Whether we’ve lived in Bedford for 1 year or for 50 years, we all love our Town. But what was Bedford like 50 years ago? What was it like with only ONE stop light in town? What was it like growing up in a small, semi-rural community?

A number of well-known and long-time Bedford residents will be the featured panelists for this interesting Society program. The event will start at 2 pm with refreshments and a social period. The guest speakers will begin after announcements at 2:30 pm.

The program will lead off with local videographer Leslie Wittman's video production, “Remembering Bedford,” which will run approximately one hour. Following the video, a panel of Bedford's most distinguished “super seniors” consisting of Bea Brown, Lois and Brown Pulliam, and Doris “Mickey” Webber, will add thoughts and reminiscences about the Town from their personal experiences or from stories passed down from their relatives.

The panel will be moderated by Historical Society Co-Vice President Bob Dorer, who will encourage audience members to add their own remembrances. Some of the topics to be covered include:

- The old Woolworth’s
- The old Friendly’s in the corner of the old shopping center
- Sparta Restaurant
- A&P grocery store where Stop & Shop is located
- Restaurant with airplane on its roof
- Bowling Alley where CVS is located
- A single stop light in Bedford
- Skating at Fawn Lake

This will be an entertaining program, full of personal narratives and historical memoirs. Planned by Society Co-Vice President Merri Lee Johnson, it also will be an opportunity for newer Bedford residents to interact with long-time Bedford residents who have lots of fascinating stories to share. Bring your new neighbor! Bring a friend!

The Webber Connections

It is amazing how small the world is! A recent motion picture, “The Finest Hours” produced by Walt Disney Pictures, tells the true story of Bos'n Mate First Class Bernard C. “Bernie” Webber, who rescued 32 sailors from a 503-foot-long tanker that had sheared in half during a winter Nor'easter off Cape Cod in February, 1952.

Bernie Webber maneuvered a 36-foot motor lifeboat from the U.S. Coast Guard Station in Chatham, MA out into the ferocious storm featuring 70-knot winds, blinding snow and 60-foot seas to save the crew of the SS Pendleton, a stricken oil tanker. He and his crew of three received the Gold Lifesaving Medal – the Coast Guard's highest award for bravery.

Years later, at the age of 79, Bernie Webber was recounting this sea rescue to the young cadets at the Coast Guard Academy in Connecticut when he met Alex Webber, a young cadet, and the grandson of Doris “Mickey” Webber of Bedford. Alex asked Bernie if they could be related. After a bit of genealogical research, it was determined that they were cousins!

Alex is the son of Todd Webber, who grew up in Bedford.
Todd Webber’s mother, Mickey, is a well-known member of the Bedford community and the Bedford Historical Society. At the Society’s February, 2016 meeting, she spoke briefly about The Finest Hours movie as well as the book by the same name (which was the subject of a Historical Society program a couple years back), and the connection between Bedford’s Webber family and the 1952 Coast Guard rescue.

These Webber “connections” sparked an interest in knowing a bit more about the Webber family, one of the very early families that settled here in Bedford. The first Webber settler to Bedford was Benjamin Webber, son of James Webber (born approx. 1665) of Medford. (Note: the superscript number after a name indicates the applicable generation for each individual.) Benjamin married Susanna Whittome of Medford in 1727. After he died in 1732, she remarried, to Christopher Page of Bedford.

Capt. John Webber (son of Benjamin) was the third generation in this country. He settled at the Danforth Inn (better known as the Shawsheen House at the corner of Page and Shawsheen Roads) and later purchased the property, so it’s really the former Danforth-Webber Inn. He married Sarah Fassett, and they raised 12 children there. The family tree from 11 of those 12 children (one child, Susanna, died at age 4 months) leads to dozens of branches and hundreds of relatives.

Two of Capt. Webber’s 12 children were William (b. 1762) – his second child, and Job (b.1769) – his fifth child. William’s family tree leads to Mickey Webber’s husband’s family, and Job’s tree includes another Bernie Webber, who lived on Orchard Road in Bedford into the 1990s.

Capt. Webber’s wife Sarah died at age 38 (in 1782), and Capt. Webber married again, to Susannah Simonds Page, the widow of Ebenezer Page of Bedford. According to A.E. Brown’s History of the Town of Bedford published in 1891, Capt. Webber was active in Town government, serving as Town Collector, Town Treasurer and Town Clerk. He also was a delegate to important conventions of the Revolutionary period, and Bedford’s Representative to the Massachusetts General Court (legislature) in 1787.

Capt. Webber’s son William also was prominent in town affairs, serving as Town Clerk for almost a quarter of a century and as a Representative to the General Court for 8 years. One of William’s children was Benjamin Abbott, whose son Levi William (b.1832) married Nancy J. Reed. Their son, Abbott Reed Webber (b. 1877), was the father of Mickey Webber’s late husband. Mickey’s husband, Abbott Reed Webber, Jr., was a paratrooper in World War II and was dropped into Normandy on D-Day and later wounded at the Battle of the Bulge.

Mickey and Reed, as he was called, had three sons: Scott, Todd and Glenn. Todd’s son Alex – Mickey’s grandson who met the Coast Guard’s famous Bernie Webber – is now a Coast Guard helicopter pilot stationed in Atlantic City, NJ. Todd's other son, Kip, is a West Point graduate.

As noted, another of Capt. Webber’s sons, Job, was a direct ancestor of Wallace Gleason Webber, founder of the Paine Webber investment firm. Wallace entered Blackstone Bank in Boston, as a boy, and A.E. Brown’s book says that he “was rapidly promoted in positions of trust, ... and has met with financial success. His love for the town of his nativity and that of his ancestors led him to make many ventures to promote its welfare. He purchased tracts of land, opened streets and put house-lots into the market, and built many houses.”

One of those houses was his own, a mansion built on a hill near the corner of The Great Rd. and Hillside Rd. Unfortunately, it is no longer standing, as Wallace required in his will that the house be razed upon his death. The reason for this decision is unknown.

One of Wallace’s descendants was another Bernie, aka Marcus Bernard Webber, Jr. (1914-1993), who lived on Orchard Road in Bedford. Other Bedford residents Alfred H. (1904-1982) and Alden W. (1910-1993) were brothers and the sons of Alden B. Webber, Wallace’s brother.

The Bernie Webber of the 1952 Coast Guard rescue (1928-2009) was the son of the Rev. A. Bernard Webber, a Baptist minister in Milton, MA, and a descendant of another branch of Capt. John Webber’s large family tree.

This story tells only a small portion of the important contributions of the Webber family to Bedford's history, and reveals how small the world truly is!

Carol Amick

THANK YOU! Donations: Judy & Nat Brown, Carol Amick & Bill Moonan, Barry Patel, Gary & Olga Feldman, Renewal: Melinda Dietrich
American history is traditionally taught giving credit to a few illustrious leaders for gaining this country’s independence, totally missing the most critical ingredient especially in Massachusetts. Following the Boston Tea Party in December 1773, King George and Parliament had retaliated with what became known as the “Intolerable Acts”. These extreme measures triggered a “bottom up” revolution by Massachusetts’ entire aroused citizenry.

The Boston Port Bill prohibited all commerce to and from Boston in order to starve it into submission. That backfired, as other colonists throughout the Commonwealth kept the city stocked with provisions. Another of the acts, the Massachusetts Government Act, prohibited town meetings without permission from the Crown’s governor. It took authority away from elected representatives to appoint or remove public officials in both local and provincial government. After governing themselves since the Pilgrims and Puritans first landed, Massachusetts colonists felt their economic and legal rights were threatened. That government act backfired even more, as elected leaders and townspeople quickly coordinated their activities to thwart the Crown.

In June 1774 Bedford town meeting chose a Committee of Correspondence, consisting of John Reed, Deacon Stephen Davis, Joseph Hartwell, John Webber and John Moore, and they met with their counterparts from other towns. Horseback riders undoubtedly conveyed official communications, but through town meetings and church services, as well as casual conversations between locals and travelers at inns and taverns, news quickly spread as citizens organized their resistance.

As described in Founding Myths by Ray Raphael, the first court made up of Crown-appointed officials under the Mass. Government Act was due to meet on August 16, 1774, but they were shut out of the Great Barrington courthouse by 1,500 angry and organized patriots. Two weeks later in Springfield, 3,000-4,000 patriots again shut down the court and forced the judges to renounce their commissions. In Cambridge on September 2, 4,000 patriots forced the Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts to resign from the Governor's Council. A rumor that the British Regulars had killed six patriots triggered the “Powder Alarm”, where over 20,000 men from throughout the countryside headed toward Boston to confront the Redcoats. Following that incident, in Worcester on September 6, over 4,600 militiamen from 37 communities gathered and forced the Crown-appointed officials to walk a gauntlet and renounce their commissions.

Similarly, patriots shut down the Crown's government in Salem, Concord, Barnstable, Taunton and Plymouth. When Governor Gage arrested 7 men in Salem for calling a town meeting, 3,000 farmers marched to the jail and set them free. After another incident, Governor Gage was quoted to say, “Damn ‘em! I won't do anything about it unless his Majesty sends me more troops.” Town meetings continued to be held, and by early October 1774 Massachusetts patriots had seized all political and military control outside of Boston without a shot being fired. In October 1774 patriots from throughout Massachusetts formed a new government body, the Provincial Congress, and became self-governing. Bedford was represented by John Reed and Dr. Joseph Ballard.

In September 1774, in preparing to defend against a British counterattack, a convention of Committees of Correspondence urged each town “to enlist one third of the men … between sixteen and sixty years of age, to be ready to act at a minute's warning” - the legendary Minutemen. In January 1775 town meeting chose John Reed as Bedford's delegate to the next Provincial Congress. It also established a Committee of Inspection, consisting of John Reed, Moses Abbott, Thomas Page, Ebenezer Page and Edward Stearns. At the Provincial Congress in February 1775, the plan was adopted for enrolling all able-bodied men and enlisting at least one-quarter of the men enrolled. In March 1775 Bedford voted to pay 25 “minute-men” one shilling per week and two shillings to be allowed two officers. The Bedford Minutemen chose Jonathan Willson as Captain, Moses Abbott as Lieutenant, and Nathaniel Page as standard-bearer.

April 19, 1775 - Despite poetic license, two of the most common stories of that morning are myths. After receiving his instructions, Paul Revere was rowed across the harbor to a waiting horse and reached Lexington, but he failed in his mission to warn the people in Concord that the British Regulars were coming. He was captured, had the horse that was loaned to him taken by the British, and was forced to walk back to Lexington. The lantern signals from the Old North Church “one if by land, two if by sea” were given not to Revere but to an unidentified messenger who never reached either Lexington or Concord, so that plan also failed.

Nevertheless, a wide range of other pre-arranged communications enabled thousands of militia and Minutemen “in every Middlesex village and town” to begin mustering by the time Revere was captured. Observers were everywhere, messengers on horseback were passing the word, and bells were being rung in bell towers as an alarm. An unidentified rider left Charlestown at the same time as Revere heading north to Tewksbury. Captain Jonathan Willson was the only Bedford Minuteman killed in the battle with the British.

Photo/illustration: Jan van Steenwijk
“Revolution” cont. from pg. 3

Trull in Tewksbury received the word and then fired shots from his window to alert the militia in Dracut. The Dracut commander heard the shots and mustered his troops hours before the British even reached Lexington’s Battle Green.

Revere and William Dawes reached Lexington and were able to warn John Hancock and Samuel Adams, who were at Reverend Clarke’s home. Some time after two o’clock in the morning Captain Parker of the Lexington Minuteman Company sent two couriers, Benjamin Tidd and Nathaniel Monroe, to Bedford and beyond to warn the townspeople. The first houses in Bedford were those of Nathaniel Page on Page Road and of Christopher Page a short distance up Old Billerica Road. From there the Pages spread the word through Bedford.

During the Battle of Bunker Hill several months later in June 1775, cannon fire from across the harbor in Boston and from British ships in the harbor was a major factor in the eventual defeat of the patriots. For the rest of that year, things were at a standoff in Boston. However, with the British entirely shut out of the countryside, during the winter of 1775-76 Col. Knox and his men were able to bring the cannons from Fort Ticonderoga down the frozen Hudson River, over the snow-covered Berkshires and across the entire colony without being detected. In March 1776 the British in Boston were very surprised one morning to see the batteries of cannons aimed at them from Dorchester Heights. The cannons were too high for British ships to fire at them and an assault across the harbor failed, leaving the British forces totally exposed. On March 17, 1776 – Evacuation Day – the last British forces sailed out of Boston Harbor.

The British departure from Boston left Massachusetts entirely self-governing, more than 3 months before the Declaration of Independence was adopted.

Don Corey