The Bedford Flag, the oldest existing flag in the United States. On view at the Bedford Library.

The Preservationist

Bedford Historical Society, Inc. - Bedford - Massachusetts
Founded in 1893

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Enjoy our Next Program

Sunday, March 25 - 2:00 PM

First Parish Church on the Common
75 Great Road

A refreshment period from 2 - 2:30 will kick-off this event.

The Road to Concord: How Four Stolen Cannons Ignited the Revolutionary War

Guest speaker:
Author J.L.Bell

Several events led to the start of the American Revolution. Among them were:

- The taxes imposed on the colonies by KingGeorge III, to recoup his expenses of the French and Indian War (1754-1763), and the boycott of British goods done by the colonists in retaliation for the taxes;
- Dumping tea – a colonial staple – into Boston Harbor so that none of the tea with its accompanying taxes could be unloaded;
- King George's imposition of the "Intolerable Acts" in retribution for the Boston Tea Party, of which one act – the so-called Quartering Act that required colonists to house British soldiers in their homes – particularly incensed the colonies and especially Massachusetts.

Tension was high, and the colonists began to amass arms and prepare for what they felt was an inevitable battle with the oppressive British army.

Our guest speaker believes another activity of the colonists helped to ignite the Revolutionary War: their efforts to build an artillery force and attempts by British General Thomas Gage – the commander of all British forces in North America at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War -- to prevent that insurgency.

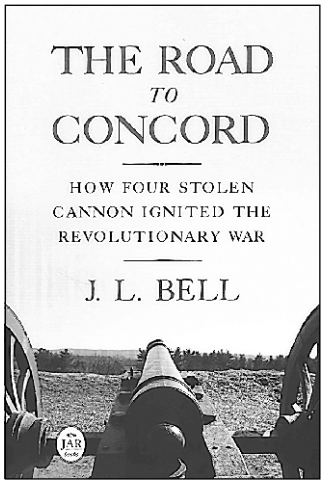
Author J.L. Bell will describe the Patriots' efforts to form an artillery group, which includes a little-known story about four cannons stolen by the colonists from the British in Boston. He has written a book on the same topic, and will have autographed copies available for sale at this event.

After brief announcements by Society President Don Corey, Mr. Bell will begin his talk.

The small brass cannons were smuggled out of Boston to the countryside, and later located by royal spies in Concord. The Patriots and Gen. Gage both had reasons to keep those guns out of their public reports on the start of the war, meaning this narrative has never been fully told.

J.L. Bell is a writer concentrating on the Revolutionary War.

Carol Amick



Presidents Message

Community Preservation

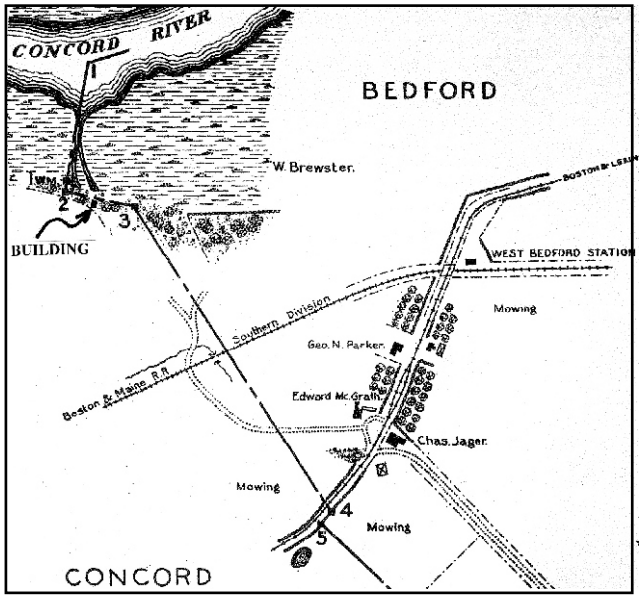
In recent years Bedford has been able to preserve and restore for adaptive re-use all its historic municipal buildings – Old Town Hall, Union School (now Town Center), old Junior High School (now Town Hall), Stearns Memorial Library (now Police Station), and so on. Unfortunately, Bedford's privately-owned historic buildings have not fared nearly as well. Many have been lost - demolished by developers capitalizing on Bedford's residential housing market and replaced with large new homes.

Residents have regularly supported historic preservation measures at Town Meetings in maintaining the character of the community, including adoption of the Demolition Delay Bylaw and addition of a number of properties to the National Park Services' National Register of Historic Places. Unfortunately, neither of these measures provides any permanent legal protection.

Bedford is now moving toward use of a method used successfully by some other towns to provide permanent protection, in placing permanent preservation restrictions on deeds. This was done for the Farley-Hutchinson-Kimball Home (ca.1700) on North Road when it was owned by the Historical Society. The town is investigating the same procedure with willing owners of several other 17th and 18th Century properties.

The Historical Society strongly supports these and other such measures to protect Bedford' shrinking base of historic properties.

Don Corey



1904 Town line marker plan

Ornithologist William Brewster in Bedford

William Brewster (1851-1919) was one of the most prominent ornithologists of his time. He was Curator of Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology and a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He was co-founder of the American Ornithology Union and served as its President, and in 1896 he became the 1st President of the fledgling Massachusetts Audubon Society. Based on a recent find at the Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, he was a regular visitor to Bedford and owned property here.

Notes from a book on Brewster's journals (**October Farm,** Daniel Chester French) describe his local activities. "In 1891 he bought a tract of woodland on the Concord River opposite the Great Meadows, known as Ball's Hill (*in Concord),* which had been a favorite haunt of Thoreau's, and soon after added to it Holden's Hill and still later Davis' Hill with its stand of towering pines. Subsequently he bought the John Barrett Farm with its typical farmhouse dating back to early in the 18th Century. Altogether he acquired about 300 acres. He restored the old house … and called his domain 'October Farm'." In 1892 Brewster's log shows that he moved (floated) his boathouse from the Old Manse boat launch down the Concord River to his property on the NW side of the river.

Last spring Great Meadows NWR trail volunteers including Bedford resident Alan Bragg doing maintenance work at the Refuge came across a stone building foundation adjacent to the Concord River wetlands almost on the Bedford-Concord town line. It is similar to the stone foundation across the river on the October Farm property where Mr. Brewster stored his "sailing" canoe. The Historical Society was contacted for any relevant insight or maps in its archives.

When Bedford was incorporated, Richard Wheeler's 1729 property line with its many jogs became the town line in West Bedford. (His ca.1695 house at 445 Concord Road still stands). A 1904 Massachusetts Atlas in the Society's archives, with detailed plans and descriptions of the town line markers, provided the first clues to the foundation (see plan above). It showed the granite markers in this area, a building about where the ruins are located, a canal cut through the wetlands out to the river, paths leading toward the site, and the name "W. Brewster" noted. Subsequently, a Registry of Deeds search uncovered an 1898 deed that conveyed about 7 acres of land in Bedford and Concord adjacent to the river from Edward McGrath (who owned the Wheeler House at that time) to William Brewster. The foundation is located within that parcel. The parcel included a path out to the railroad right of way.

The West Bedford railroad station was only a short walk from the stone foundation, and electric trolleys from Boston to Concord and beyond also passed this area after 1900. It is almost certain that the foundation was Mr. Brewster's boathouse on the Bedford side of the river, which he reached by train or trolley. Remnants of the canal cut through the wetlands in front of the foundation can still be seen.

An excerpt from Mr. Brewster's journal dated September 29, 1910, noted, "As I was on my way from the landing across the river to the West Bedford station about 8 o'clock this morning, I heard at least a dozen Song Sparrows singing at short, regular intervals." In those days, it must have been a pleasant and fairly easy commute through Bedford to the city in decent weather. Not any more!

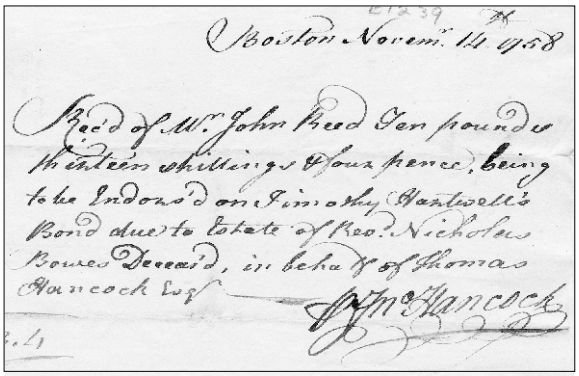
Don Corey

With your support Bedford's past can be accessed in the future!

Then & Now

During the 1930s, the parcel of land on the north side of the North Road- Chelmsford Road (Route 4) intersection was developed and the Bedford Inn opened for business – one of several similarly named businesses at different locations in town over the years. Extremely popular with local residents, it was run by Mary Wilson and specialized in fried clams and ice cream. It also had the closest public telephone for neighbors who still didn't have phones back then. After WW2, it became Sailor Bill's.

The building has undergone substantial modifications and landscaping has been added, but it is still recognizable in its current transformation to Renzo's Salon at 428 North Road.


Boston Novem. 14 1758

Recd of Mr. John Reed Ten pounds fifteen shillings & four pence, being to be Indorsd on Timothy Hartwell's Bond due to Estate of Revd. Nicholas Bowes Deceasd, in behalf of Thomas Hancock Esq

John Hancock

John Reed receipt signed by John Hancock

What's in Bedford's Attic?: Hancock Documents

By Matthew Leece

The Bedford Historical Society is especially proud of several artifacts we own that relate to John Hancock. Even though he was never a resident of the town, the fact that he produced the first and largest signature on the Declaration of Independence makes him a celebrity! Our Hancock items include several unsigned receipts of payments received from Hancock. In addition, we have a receipt, bearing Hancock's own, distinct signature, that was drafted when he was working as a lawyer for his uncle's firm in Boston. The most important object is the official document appointing Bedford resident John Reed as Justice of the Peace, signed by Hancock during his tenure as governor of Massachusetts in 1781.

Anyone interested to learn more about John Reed and his connections with John Hancock can find out quite a bit about him in A.E. Brown's *History of the Town of Bedford* (1891). Reed was an important man; a patriot and a member of both Bedford's Committee of Correspondence and its delegate to the Provincial Congress, through which Reed and Hancock very likely knew each other. A twist in the story ties Reed back to that receipt that bears Hancock's signature; it represents a payment by Reed, settling the estate of the Reverend Nicholas Bowes. The estate was being handled by John Hancock, working for the law offices of his uncle Thomas Hancock. Some confusion stems from the fact that Reverend Bowes' father-in-law was also named John Hancock; he was the minister in Lexington from 1697 to 1752! Reading further through A.E. Brown's book, Rev. Bowes' daughter, Lucy, the wife of Rev. Jonas Clark of Lexington, entertained both Samuel Adams and the patriot John Hancock in her home on the night of April 18, 1775, before the Battle of Lexington and Concord.

Primary sources such as receipts and official appointment documents do not tell a modern reader much about the men associated with them, but as you can see, they make for an interesting place to start learning about historical figures. As can be seen, relationships between individuals are often a complicated web which historians must untangle to uncover the truth about the past. Holding onto artifacts like these and preserving them is important responsibility of the Historical Society.

"What's in Bedford's Attic?' highlights some of the fascinating artifacts held in the archives of the Bedford Historical Society, kept on behalf of the town of Bedford. What's in your attic? Visit us at 2 Mudge Way, Bedford, MA or call

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"We Don't Make History...
We Keep It Alive..!"

The Bedford Historical Society, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Support your Heritage.

"It fired not a shot..."

Sorting through my many files of documents relating to Bedford's Year Y2K festivities, I found this beautiful poem written by Ellen Michaud in 1999. It spells out the importance of our Bedford Flag in a new way, capturing the essence of that silk banner which still exists roughly three hundred forty years later, and viewable in the Bedford Library.

If only the flag could talk, it would probably agree with Ellen's words. ***Bedford re-enactments take place once again in early April***, so it is time to visit our Library and view the flag, a national treasure.

Jan van Steenwijk

The Bedford Flag poem by:
© Ellen Michaud, 1999

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It fired not a shot;
It spoke not a word;
It beat not a drum;
Its message felt, not heard.

Many a battle it had seen;
Through weather fair and foul it had been;
Had rallied many a tired soldier's heart;
Yes, it had been there from the start.

Farmers and militia brave and true;
Some gave their lives for freedom;
Before the war was through.

But all men need a symbol;
Lest their sturdy spirits sag;
And for those patriot Minute Man;
It was the Bedford Flag.

THANK YOU!

Renewals for March
Richard and June Axtell, Irma Carter, Michael Cashman, Barbara Claflin, Lois Denaro, Arthur and Marietta Ellis, Frans van Berkhout, David Allen Fitch, Claude French, Carol Grof, Sandra Hackman, Bud Koor, Ned and Susan Leeming, Richard and Meg LeSchack, Rodney Leskowski, Brian Oulighan, David & Virginia Packer, Jan & Dan Puffer, Heather and David Pullen, Fay Russo, Doris Smith, Irving and Jean Smith, Adrienne St. John, John & Lucia Stewart

Donations for March
Sharon and Thomas McDonald

The Bedford Historical Society appreciates your support