

HARWINTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

May 2014

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“Rights and Responsibilities in History”

History Day in Connecticut is an annual program for students in grades 6-12 that encourages exploration of local, state, national, and world history. This year’s theme was “Rights and Responsibilities in History” and more than 200 students participated in the contest.

After selecting a historical topic that related to the annual theme, students conducted extensive research using libraries, archives, museums, and oral history interviews. Students analyzed and interpreted their findings, drew conclusions about their topic's significance in history, and created final projects that demonstrated their work.

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Looking Back at Harwinton’s History

HARWINTON WAS SLOW TO MAKE TRANSITION TO NEW MAIL SYSTEM

According to the book “History of Harwinton” by Raymond George Bentley, records concerning post office locations in Harwinton during the first half of the 19th century are sparse. Bentley says it is likely that there were several places in town where mail was delivered for town residents to pick up.

Harwinton’s first postmaster of record was in 1822 and it is likely that the mail was kept in his home or store where it could be picked up whenever a resident was in the area and expecting a letter or package.

Across the country many inhabitants of cities had enjoyed free home mail delivery since the end of the Civil War, but the majority of the population in the United States (including Harwinton) lived in outlying areas and traveled to a central location to pick up their own mail. *Continued on page 2...*



HARWINTON TRANSITIONS TO RURAL FREE DELIVERY SERVICE

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On the federal level, merchant John Wanamaker was the Post Master General from 1889 until 1893. “He thought it made more sense for one person to deliver mail than for 50 people to ride into town to collect their mail.” Several bills attempting to establish a federal delivery system were presented, but the cost was high and each attempt was defeated. Finally, in 1896, the Post Office Department agreed to an experimental delivery to several rural areas of West Virginia, the home state of the Postmaster General at that time.

By the beginning of the 20th century trains were coming and going from the East Litchfield Railroad Station and would drop off or pick up mail, thus speeding up the delivery process. In Harwinton, the mail would be taken from the rail station to the outlying post offices in Harwinton Center or Campville where it would be sorted for local residents to retrieve when they were in the area. The post office in the Campville section might have been either in Harwinton or Litchfield depending on the current location of the postmaster’s residence or business.

Eventually, the federal Rural Free Delivery service took hold and, by 1902, the concept had become popular enough to be considered a permanent mail service. The word “free” was dropped in 1906. The backing of the National Grange, National Farmers’ Congress, and State Farmers’ Alliance was important to the success of the new program.

Improved roads and employment of many rural mail carriers followed. Soon the Post Office Department required customers to have standard sized boxes that were easily accessible by the carriers. At first the carriers delivered the mail in horse-drawn vehicles, but by 1929 many horses had been replaced by motor cars. The mail was delivered along “star routes,” a term that referred to the mail delivery service routes created by federal government contracts.

The vote in 1902 to bring the new federal program of Rural Free Delivery mail service to Harwinton found 50 residents opposed and only two in favor of the plan, according to Bentley. Harwinton residents apparently opposed RFD mail service partly because the addresses that were associated with the mail routes were identified by nearby towns such as Torrington or Plymouth where the mail route originated. There was a concern that Harwinton would lose its identity by not having the town name in the mailing address. There was also a worry that the mail stage driver and local postmasters would lose their jobs and local businesses would suffer when people stopped picking up their mail and shopping at the postmaster’s store, or at retailers along the way.

According to Bentley, the 50-2 vote in Harwinton opposing the Rural Free Delivery system was apparently over ruled and the free RFD deliveries in Harwinton began.

NOTE: *The photo on page 1 was taken when Harwinton’s post office was located in a home at Charter Oak Farm on Burlington Road (Route 4) in the center of town.*

Upcoming Programs & Events

May 4 – Sunday – Follow-up to recent series on Civil War. Today’s program will focus on the battle at Cold Harbor. This one-hour program will be led by UConn professor of history Dr. Karl Valois beginning at 2 p.m. at the Harwinton Library on Bentley Drive. More details elsewhere in this newsletter on page 4.

May 9 – Friday – All day bus trip to Boston to walk the Freedom Trail. Please park at the rear of the town hall or library parking lot and arrive by 6:15 a.m. for check in. The bus will leave promptly at 6:30 a.m. This trip is sold out but there is a waiting list. Call 860-485-9343 with questions or to have your name placed on the waiting list.

August 3 - Sunday – Annual ice cream social will be held from 2-4 p.m. on the grounds of the one-room schoolhouse in front of the Harwinton Consolidated School, Route 118.

Saturday - June 14 - 10th Annual Connecticut Open House Day. Many museums open free of charge.

PERSONAL NOTES: Bruce Mosher is now a resident of Valerie Manor in Torrington and would appreciate a visit from you. The best time to visit is in the morning or early afternoon. His address is Room 136-D, Valerie Manor, 1360 Tarringford St., Torrington, CT 06790. If you know of members who are homebound or reside at a facility, brighten their day with a phone call, card, or brief visit.

Answer to April Trivia Question: The Rural Free Delivery (RFD) mail delivery system was controversial in Harwinton because none of the initial RFD addresses included the word “Harwinton.” This resulted in concern that the town might lose its unique identity. Mail was delivered to Harwinton residents via RFD routes based in nearby towns such as Torrington and Plymouth so, even though you were a resident of the town of Harwinton, your mail address might have been listed as RFD Route 2, Plymouth, Connecticut.

A Bit of Trivia for May: What was the population of Harwinton 100 years ago (1914)?

Answer in the June newsletter

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***All members are encouraged to attend historical society meetings and programs
New members and guests are always welcome.***

A big “Thank You” goes out to HHS member John Thrall for offering to clip newspaper articles from the Waterbury Republican and Hartford Courant !!! ☺

COLD HARBOR CIVIL WAR PROGRAM MAY 4

The Harwinton Historical Society will present a program on the Battle of Cold Harbor, which was fought from May 31 to June 12, 1864 (with the most significant fighting on June 3). The Battle of Cold Harbor is remembered as one of the bloodiest and most lopsided battles in American history. Here, tens of thousands of Union soldiers, commanded by General Ulysses S. Grant, were killed in hopeless frontal assaults against the entrenched Confederate troops of General Robert E. Lee. It would be the final victory of the Civil War for Lee.

Dr. Karl Valois, a UCONN History Professor, will present an overview of the battle and its significance in the war. This will be a follow up to the Society's recent series on the Civil War. The talk will take place on Sunday, May 4th from 2-3 p.m. at the Harwinton Library. All are welcome. There is no charge; however, donations are greatly appreciated.

Harwinton Historical Society

Vision Statement

To become the central town resource to help residents, students, and descendants of original settlers and others including the general public understand and appreciate Harwinton's contributions to local, regional, and national history.

NOTE: The Harwinton Historical Society's Mission and Vision statements were adopted as part of the organization's strategic plan. These statements will be reviewed periodically.

2014 History Day Focuses on "Rights and Responsibilities"

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These projects were entered into a series of competitions, from the local to the national level, where professional historians and educators evaluate them. Harwinton Historical Society Curator Bonnie Andrews was a volunteer judge for the second year at the regional level of competition held at Torrington High School in March. Regional District contests were also held in Hartford, Fairfield, New Haven, Mansfield and Manchester.

Regional winners advanced to the state contest in April and winners from the state will be eligible to proceed to the National Contest in June at the University of Maryland.

History Day in Connecticut is organized by **Connecticut's Old State House**, with support from the **Connecticut Historical Society**, the **Connecticut League of History Organizations** and **Connecticut Humanities**. Major funding is provided by **Connecticut Humanities**.

The names of winning students and entries will be posted on the History Day in Connecticut website at historydayct.org