

Spirits Inhabit Rye Town Museum

Why should you visit a town museum? As Louis Armstrong said when asked to define Jazz: "If you have to ask, you'll never know!" (But we'll tell you anyway.) The Rye Historical Society and Town Museum is but one jewel in the crown of seacoast town museums, where history comes alive.

Be your own guide. Take a tour through over 400 years of natural and human history. You'll find the answers to endless questions and create all sorts of new questions as well. How do you make the list of Founding Families of Rye? Where did that shark's tooth come from? Is this drum really from the War of 1812? These medical instruments from the 1800's are barbaric! How did this twisted cable change the world? What are these funny looking horse shoes? How many hotels did Rye have anyway? Are there any boarding houses left? How did they build those great jetties at Rye Harbor? Why do you have so many artifacts from the Locke family. Did the NH National Guard really train in Rye for two weeks every summer? Did Rye really have a semi-pro hockey team that played in Boston Garden? Isn't that an old photo of my house? Where are my relatives buried? What are those misty islands offshore? (take the Uncle Oscar out of Rye Harbor and find out!) How did Rye fare in Prohibition? What's Aristotle Onassis doing here? Why are people still harvesting ice on Rye ponds? Why hasn't Rye built a replica of David Thomson's fort at Odiorne Point? As you walk through this packed little museum, ghostly neighbors may tap you on the shoulder. They lived in very different times.

The Rye Town Museum is haunted by your former neighbors. Harry Green built a cabin in the woods, wrote his own hunting laws and entertained visitors with a bottomless barrel of hard cider and irreverent tales of Rye. His brother Charlie did the same in the kitchen by the old Glenwood stove in the family farmhouse when he wasn't farming, being a selectman and managing and playing wild basketball games for the home team in the Town Hall in the 20's. Anne Drake was a coast watcher for the government during World War II, keeping watch on Jenness Beach for enemy planes and ships. Actors at the Farragut Playhouse flocked to the Pagoda Dance Hall on the boulevard where live bands played "In the Mood." Bertha Foss lived alone in the boarding house near Foss Beach, keeping alive the tales of the Golden Age of Rye resorts. Farmer George Lang kept a diary from 1871-1900 at his farm atop Bedbug Hill, the highest point in town. You can read it at the Rye Town Museum. Newell Marden and Blake Rand practically ran the town (1920's to the 1940's) from Blake's store on the corner of Lang Road, fueled by his home made cider. World War I veteran and loner Jess Walker was a master woodsman, prankster, distiller of whiskey and keeper of guns. He lived in a wooden cabin behind the church and woe to any man who got on the bad side of Jess. The museum has many artifacts from his cabin. They and many others are here waiting for you at the museum.

"I saw the open door as we were leaving the Rye Library and it looked inviting," a recent visitor remarked. "What a fantastic display." History is bewitching, inviting, messy and inspiring. If you feel the pull, give in. It is free and it belongs to you. But beware. The Rye Town Museum is always crowded with the spirits of bygone days.

Rye History in a Clam Shell

Archaeologists think this area was inhabited by natives dating back maybe 30,000 years. When David Thomson arrived at the mouth of the Piscataqua River with ten men in 1623, they established what would later become Rye as the oldest town in New Hampshire. They built a stockade fort and began a fish drying business in an area that area was teeming with Abenaki peoples. Within the century most natives had succumbed to illness or had been driven inland and Rye had been further settled by William Berry and other founding families who moved inland to what is now Rye Center. Rye's struggle for independence from surrounding towns ended when it became a parish in 1726 and an incorporated town in 1785. Fishing and farming sustained the population of barely a thousand souls well into the 1800's when boarding houses and hotels began to attract tourists from far away to the inviting beaches of Rye. Rye Harbor was a thriving coastal port for a variety of goods. The Golden Age of Rye resorts lasted well into the 20th century as did farming and fishing, until the modern world took Rye residents beyond its borders. But the three great crescent beaches still lure people today as Rye retains its coastal heritage.

Rye Historical Society/Town Museum born from the Bi-Centennial

Rye celebrated the nation's 200 birthday for three memorable days in July of 1976 and they created something lasting as well – the Rye Historical Society. For years the society collected artifacts and printed materials, preserved old graveyards, ran house tours, presented programs to the public and searched for a building to house its collection. That dream came true in July 2002 when the Rye Town Museum, beside the Library, opened to the public in a former antique shop from the 1930's. At last people could see the Parsons doctor's medical instruments from the 1800's, documents dating back to the 1700's, bog shoes worn by horses harvesting salt marsh hay, the ledger from the 1700's Garland tavern, a rich collection of historic photos, etc. The society/museum also shows films about Rye, houses a research library, works with the local schools, promotes historic projects in town, sponsors house and barn tours and presents programs to the public.

Contact Information

Visit the RHS website for museum hours, photos and other information at:
www.ryenhistoricalociety.org museum e-mail: info@ryenhistoricalociety.org

Contact person: Alex Herlihy, director. 603 997 6742, alexherlihy@comcast.net
Rye Historical Society/Town Museum, (10 Old Parish Rd.), PO Box 583, Rye, NH 03870

