



December 2014 Newsletter

NORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P.O. Box 693

NORWELL, MASSACHUSETTS 02061

WWW.NORWELLHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG

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The Norwell Historical Society
P.O. Box 693
Norwell, MA 02061
781-659-1888
www.norwellhistoricalsociety.org

MUSEUM & LIBRARY HOURS

The Jacobs Farmhouse is open by appointment only. Please contact the Society for further information or to schedule a tour.

The Norwell Historical Society Library at the Norwell Middle School (328 Main Street) is open on Wednesdays from 2:00 to 3:00 during the school year or by appointment.

The Norwell Historical Society Archives Center on the 3rd floor of the Sparrell School is open by appointment only.

The purpose of this Society shall be: a.) to plan and arrange for the promotion of knowledge about the Town of Norwell by discussion, research, meetings and publications; b.) to collect, solicit and preserve documents, manuscripts, charts, maps, records, photographs, relics, and items of local interest; c.) to arrange, index, catalog and file/maintain such material for use by the members of the Norwell Historical Society and other interested parties; d.) to work with and cooperate with other entities, groups, organizations, and individuals directly and indirectly.

STOP BY FOR CHRISTMAS AT THE FARMHOUSE ON DECEMBER 14TH

The Norwell Historical Society will host its annual "Christmas at the Farmhouse" event at the Jacobs Homestead on the corner of Jacobs



Lane and Main Street on December 14, 2014. Everyone is invited to come and tour the house, which will be decorated for the holidays. Hot cider and victuals will be available to all who visit. No RSVP is necessary—just drop in for a tour and a treat.

Visit www.norwellhistoricalsociety.org (and click on the "Events" tab) for more information. If you are interested in baking a homemade treat for this event, please call 781-659-1888 or contact the Society via the website.

Unfortunately, the Jacobs Farmhouse is not handicapped accessible and if the weather is inclement, the event will not take place. Check the website or telephone the Society for up-to-date information.

AUTHOR JOHN CHEEVER & THE NORWELL CONNECTION

by Sam Olson

The front page of the June 23, 1982 edition of the *Boston Globe* featured an article on funeral services for John Cheever topped by a photo of his flag-draped casket being borne down the steps of Norwell's First Parish Church followed by family and friends. A hearse from Sparrell's Funeral Home, now McNamara-Sparrell, drove the few hundred feet to the burial site just behind the white-fenced eighteenth century burial ground adjacent to the parking lot where McGreal's Tavern is now located.

The *Globe* described Norwell Center on that beautiful June day--the classic

1830 church, the sound of flowing water from the town spring, the glimpse of the North River through the leaves dappled by the early summer sunshine. No Chamber of Commerce "puff" could have put our small community in a better light.

Over the succeeding years, many citizens have pondered why our community became the final resting place for Cheever, "the Chekof of the suburbs," so closely connected to the upscale towns of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. After delving into several sources describing the circumstances of Cheever's often

JOHN CHEEVER'S NORWELL CONNECTION, CONT'D.

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tortured life, I found that there were many good reasons.

John William Cheever was born in 1912 in Quincy, Mass., to a family that traced its paternal branch to a passenger on John Winthrop's flagship the *Arbella*. An idyllic childhood in the upper middle class suburb of Wollaston came to a halt when his classically-educated father, Frederick Lincoln Cheever, lost most of his assets when the shoe industry collapsed in the mid-twenties. Further losses followed in the stock market crash of 1929. In 1933, the mortgage on the imposing eleven-room house was foreclosed.

A more fortunate childhood playmate of Cheever was Rollin Bailey whose father was a Quincy banker. Rollin, who died in 2007, and his wife Ruth Chipman Bailey were longtime Parker Street residents. Rollin is remembered for voluntarily videotaping Norwell Selectmen meetings. He and Ruth were for many years mainstays of the North River Players, both on and offstage. Rollin was interviewed several times by Cheever biographer Scott Donaldson. Cheever was convinced he was never again invited to play on the Bailey tennis courts after what he perceived as his family's disgrace. Bailey recalled seeing his childhood friend for the last time on a troop train during World War II. He described Cheever's manner at their chance meeting as far from cordial.

Friends admired Mary Lily Cheever's maintaining the family by opening a gift shop on Hancock Street in Quincy. John, however, always believed she demeaned the family name by becoming a shopkeeper. Although not mentioned in sources used, I came across a notice in the *Rockland Standard* of July 2, 1933, about the Mary Cheever Shoppe opening on Washington Street, Norwell, in the John Simmons place.

Still another connection was Cheever's passing through the town to visit his grandmother's farm in Hanover where Mary Cheever and her mother operated a tearoom for a time. Cheever loved the sights, sounds, and smells of the picturesque river and the surrounding marshes.

An important Norwell experience later on was visiting his older brother Fred, his wife Iris, and their three children in their Alpine-style chalet built amidst a grove of pine trees on River Street.

Yet another South Shore link was his attendance at Thayer Academy in Braintree. Although the official reason for John's expulsion was his failure to meet academic requirements, he claimed it was for smoking. Regardless, his first notice as a promising writer came with the publication of the short story "Expelled" in the *New Republic* in 1930.

Cheever never attended college, or, for that matter, graduated high school. The thirties was a tough time for an aspiring writer to make a living. In addition, lapses into depression, a growing dependence on alcohol, doubts about his creativity, and a self-loathing about his bisexuality were among the demons he faced. He did gain employment for a time writing travel guides for the WPA's Writers Workshop. He considered the whole program a giant "boondoggle."

In 1941, he married Mary Winterhitz who survived her husband for many years, dying herself in 2014. She was the daughter of Dr. Milton Winternitz, Chief of Surgery at Yale University Medical Center. She was also the granddaughter of Thomas Watson of Braintree, receiver of the first telephone message from Alexander Graham Bell. Three children were born to the couple, two of whom became writers. Although the union was often fraught with difficulties, Susan Cheever in her biography of her father, *Home Before Dark*, felt the marriage survived for three reasons: the children, a genuine love for one another, or simply just out of habit.

After stateside army service in World War II, Cheever's writing fortunes picked up. He had a long time arrangement with *The New Yorker* for short story contributions. Among the best known of his stories was "The Swimmer," which was made into a movie starring Burt Lancaster. While the film was being made, Cheever began an affair with the producer's wife, actress Hope Lange.

His growing success enabled him to purchase a stone-gabled Dutch Colonial overlooking the Hudson River in Ossining, New York. Although he went on to achieve all the important American literary awards including the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *The Short Stories of John Cheever*, he was able to publish only four novels. The first of these was *The Wapshot Chronicle* which took him ten years to write. His most successful, *The Falconer*, was written toward the end of his life. He continued to be nagged with the feeling that writing short stories wasn't as prestigious as writing novels.

In 1975, Cheever was teaching a course on short story writing at Boston University. While living in an apartment on Bay State Road, it was becoming apparent to associates that he was drinking himself to death.

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NORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY
MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

DATE _____ NAME _____

MAILING ADDRESS _____

TOWN _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

TELEPHONE _____ E-MAIL _____

MEMBERSHIP

3-Year Membership (\$35) _____

Life Membership (\$500) _____

Please make checks payable to the *Norwell Historical Society* and mail to: NHS,
P.O. Box 693, Norwell, MA 02061



AREAS OF INTEREST

Newsletter _____ Research Library _____

Tour Guide _____ Program Planning _____

Other: _____

JOHN CHEEVER'S NORWELL CONNECTION, CONT'D.

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Ironically it was his brother Fred, himself a recovering alcoholic, who was in part responsible for John's salvation. Fred took him out of Boston, driving him back to Ossining where Mary had him committed to Smithers Institution, a facility treating chronic alcoholism. Cheever never took another drink. Unfortunately, in 1981, he was diagnosed with renal cancer which soon metastasized. Death came on June 18, 1982.



Cheever had never expressed any interest in where he might be interred but often spoke of the family's "burying hole" in Norwell's First Parish Cemetery. Both his mother and father had been buried there when they died in the mid-forties. Brother Fred had

also attended First Parish Church for many years. Virtually broke, Fred had spent the last months of his life at Wheeler Park, a public housing facility for seniors in Scituate.

Fred's daughter, Jane Cheever Carr, now a resident of Hingham, checked with the Sparrell Funeral Home which confirmed that there was a burial plot next to his parents. The family thus decided that he would be buried here.

Cheever's widow and children asked John Updike to deliver the eulogy. Updike, then and now, is often considered the best American novelist of the mid and late twentieth century. Despite rumors to the contrary, there was no basis to believe the two writers were jealous rivals.

There were only forty mourners present as there was to be another service in Ossining the following day.

The church was packed with photographers. Loring "Spike" Wadsworth, described by one source as the quintessential canny New England undertaker, is credited with maintaining the dignity of the occasion by limiting the number of photographers admitted to the balcony.

First Parish Cemetery's caretaker recently told me that visitors asked to see the Cheever grave more than any other. The graves of father, mother and son are marked by three black stone cathedral window-shaped monuments.

A lighter touch to the day of the funeral has been supplied by John Hersey, author of *Hiroshima*. As Cheever's casket was being lowered into the ground, he noticed three frolicking boys on a pathway on a hillside above the grave. One of the boys suddenly tossed off three perfect cartwheels. Hersey said his good friend would have really liked that!

Sources used for this article:

Bailey, Blake. *Cheever A Life*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2009.

Cheever, Susan. *Home Before Dark*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1984.

Donaldson, Scott. *John Cheever A Biography*. New York: Random House, 1988.

Of Note...

The article chronicling Norwell resident Abial Farrar's experiences during the Civil War will continue in the February/March issue of the Society newsletter. Please look for the continuation of Abial's brave story then.



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at the **CHRISTMAS FARMHOUSE**

Sunday, December 14th
 2:00-4:00 pm

NORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY
 PUBLICATIONS (AN ABBREVIATED LIST...)

THE ABCs OF NORWELL _____ \$10
 by Gertrude Daneau

This coloring book is perfect for children (of all ages!). This illustrated book can be used as a text for teaching budding historians, or as a quick guide to Norwell's many famous personalities and historical features.

HISTORIC HOMESTEADS OF NORWELL _____ \$15

Learn more about our stately houses and the people who lived in them. This book, well-illustrated with drawings, discusses architectural features and includes genealogical information.

A NARRATIVE OF SOUTH SCITUATE-NORWELL _____ \$20
 by Samuel H. Olson

This book chronicles the life and times of our town from 1845-1963 through a collection of articles previously published in *The Norwell Mariner*.

HISTORY OF SOUTH SCITUATE-NORWELL _____ \$25
 by Joseph Foster Merritt

A recently re-published history of the town to 1938. A unique narrative considered to be an invaluable account of Norwell prior to WWII.

All the above items are available at the NHS Library in the Middle School on Wednesdays during the school year (2-3:00 p.m.) or you may call Wendy Bawabe at 781-659-1464, or you may request a publication using this form and enclosing a check (made payable to NHS). Mail to: NHS, P.O. Box 693, Norwell, MA 02061.

THROWBACK
 PHOTO OF THE MONTH



Where is this home? Originally built in 1836 (top photo ca. 1850s) and the Victorian porch and fretwork were later added (below photo ca. 1900).
 (Answer at the bottom of page 3)