

# LONGYEAR HISTORICAL SOCIETY and MUSEUM

## Quarterly News



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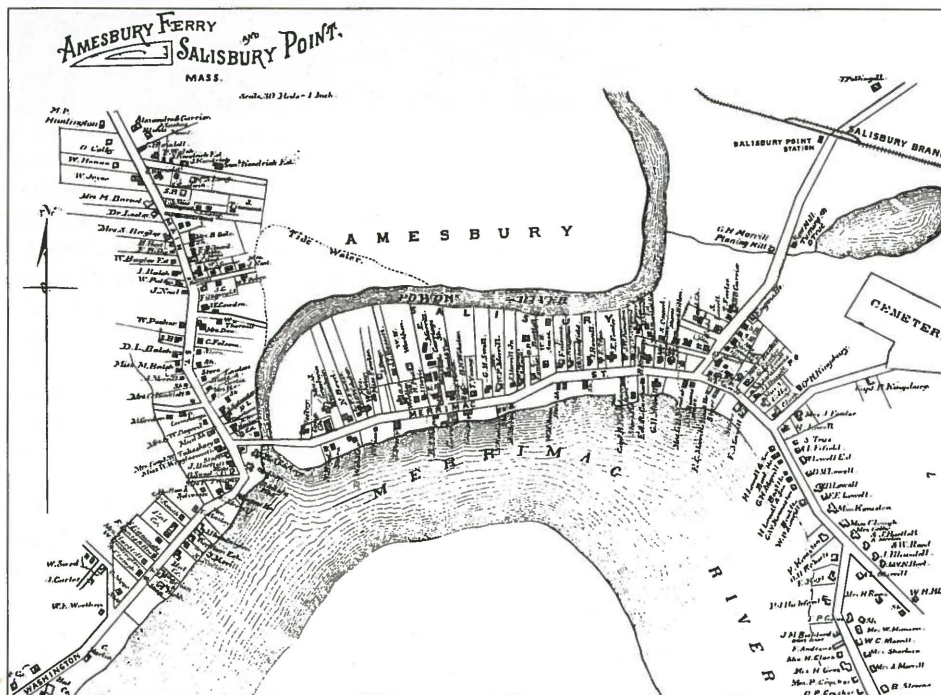
WINTER 1987-88

## FAMOUS PEOPLE OF AMESBURY

On two occasions during the years 1867-1870, Mary Baker Glover (later Eddy) lived in Amesbury, Massachusetts. She went there at the recommendation of Quaker friends, the Winslow's of Lynn, who knew of her need for a quiet place to study and write. She lived first at the home of Captain and Mrs. Nathaniel Webster, near the junction of the Powow and Merrimack rivers, and later for two short periods at the home of Miss Sarah Bagley on Main Street. Mrs. Glover moved to Amesbury about a year after her remarkable healing in Swampscott. She spent her days there in deep study of the Scriptures, seeking to better understand the divine power that had healed her.

In the last century in the small town of Amesbury, Massachusetts, lived men and women of uncommon vision: inventors, reformers, artists and poets. This article seeks to outline the atmosphere of creativity and progress into which Mrs. Glover entered in Autumn of 1867.

Amesbury's first settlers in the 1630's found a land with rich, though hidden, possibilities. A historian wrote, "When the English first landed on the coast, the country looked like one vast wood, . . . but upon a narrower survey they found every three or four miles a fruitful valley and a clear fresh rivulet or brook gliding through it, and these again were surrounded with vast woody hills, which afforded a very agreeable prospect." (Joseph Merrill's *History of Amesbury and Merrimac*, pp. 1-2.) In 1641, William Osgood started a saw mill, run by the waters of the Powow River and his own ingenuity, and supplied the settlers with



The Old Maps of Northeastern Essex County, published by Saco Valley Printing, Fryeburg, Maine.

Map of Amesbury c. 1884.

lumber to build houses.

In the late 1600's Susanna Martin of Amesbury, outspoken and unpopular with her neighbors, was arrested, taken to Salem for trial, and hung as a witch. At her trial she spoke courageously in her own defence, declaring, "I never hurt man or woman or child." (Merrill's *History of Amesbury and Merrimac*, p. 128.) Constable Orlando Bagley, an ancestor of Miss Sarah Bagley who befriended Mrs. Glover, served the warrant and escorted Mrs. Martin to the Salem jail to await trial.

The name "Bagley" appears often in Amesbury historic records. In 1654, the first Town Clerk recorded Orlando Bagley's name on the list of the first inhabitants of the town (18 in number, as only the names of the men were recorded). In 1716, Orlando Bagley, Jr., a school master, deeded to the town a portion of his own land for the purpose of building the first school house.

Squire Lowell Bagley, the father of Sarah, was a respected judge and selectman in the early 1800's.

Josiah Bartlett — doctor, judge, patriot, was one of Amesbury's most famous residents and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Born in Amesbury in 1729, Bartlett early studied Latin and Greek with a well-educated minister and later, at sixteen, apprenticed himself to a cousin to study medicine. He completed his training in four years, rather than the customary seven, and began his practice at the age of twenty in nearby Kingston, New Hampshire. He was first elected to the Provincial Congress, then to the First Continental Congress and finally to the Second Continental Congress which met in Philadelphia in September, 1775.

On July 2, 1776, when the vote for independence was formally called for, the Congressional delegates voted

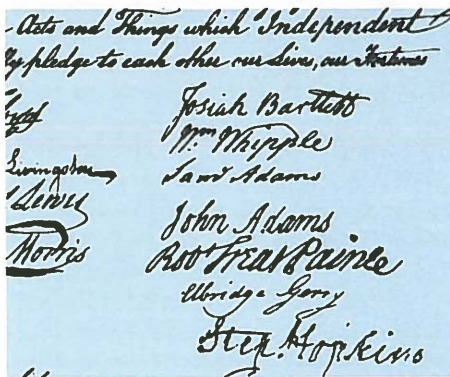
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The Merrimack River, near the place where it is joined by the Powow River.

“aye” or “nay.” Josiah Bartlett, representing the northernmost colony, cast the first vote in favor of independence. On August 2, Josiah Bartlett joined his fellow delegates in signing the Declaration of Independence.



A portion of the Declaration of Independence showing Josiah Bartlett's signature.

A statue of Josiah Bartlett stands today near the Amesbury Public Library. It was a gift to the state of Massachusetts from Jacob Huntington, a leading citizen of a century later.

Jacob R. Huntington, later called “the Henry Ford of carriagemaking,” started in a modest way the business that would produce 15,000 to 20,000 carriages annually by the 1880’s. In 1853, at the age of 23, young “Jake” took a painting job in nearby West Amesbury, walking the ten miles round-trip daily. The job took six weeks, earned the industrious young man \$100, and gave him lots of time to think. At that time custom-built carriages were too expensive for the average man to afford. If carriages could be built cheaply and more quickly, he reasoned, there would be a large market ready and eager to buy.

Jake invested his first \$100 in materials, and, in eight weeks, rolled his first carriage, well-made yet affordable, out of his shop. He decided to duplicate styles, departing from the then current practice of manufacturing each carriage uniquely. He was boss, salesman, bookkeeper, painter, and blacksmith, training his employees from the wealth of innovative ideas that crowded his mind.

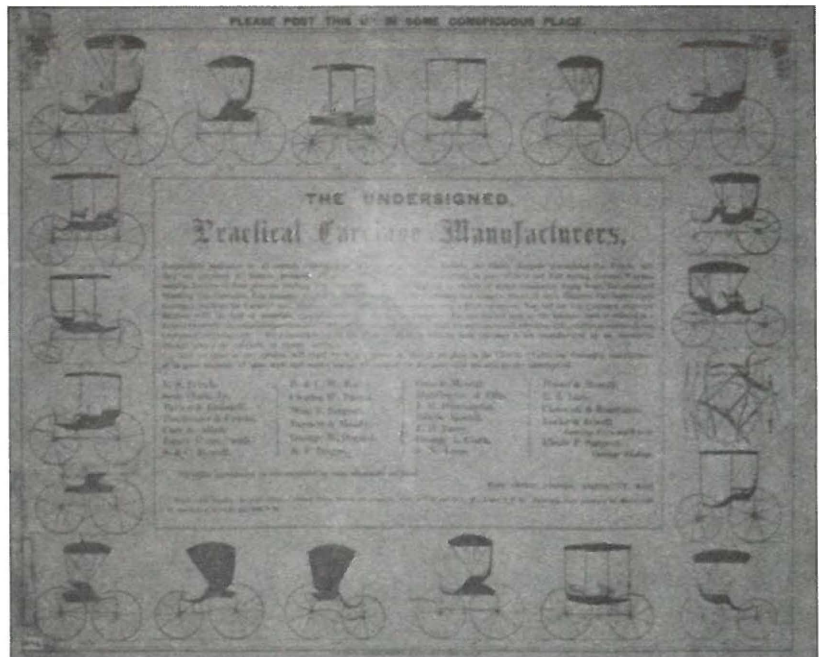
From this modest beginning the Amesbury mass-produced carriage industry burgeoned. Huntington encouraged his employees to start their own businesses, believing in the value of competition. By 1875, that first hopeful investment of \$100 had generated an industry worth close to

\$400,000 for the multitude of carriage manufacturers in the town. The carefully crafted yet modestly priced vehicles made Amesbury a major carriage manufacturing center. That same year Huntington, at the age of 45, retired a wealthy man.

Samuel Rowell was one of Amesbury’s carriage makers, but he was also an artist. Born in 1815 into a large Quaker family, he early expressed a talent and an eagerness to paint. This bent, however, was against the guiding principles set forth at that time in the Society’s *Book of Discipline*. “Frills and furbelows,” an Elder called it at the Monthly Meeting. “Friends [Quakers] should eschew and teach their children to shun them.”

Young Sam’s father, Jacob, whose ancestors had first helped to settle the town, disagreed with the Elder. “Thy Inward Light tells thee that painting, as an art, is idle,” he replied, “but my Inward Light tells me that it is an acceptable pursuit if the painter works in the right spirit, for the glory of God and the edification of his fellows. I shall follow my leading.” (“Samuel Rowell, 1815–1890: Amesbury’s First Professional Artist,” pp. 3–4.) Jacob sent the boy to nearby Newburyport to take weekly art lessons with a respected artist, Thomas Lawson. Later Sam studied portrait painting in Philadelphia.

After marrying in 1841, Rowell became an itinerant artist. He traveled to the busy textile cities south along the Merrimack River, placed ads in their weekly newspapers, and set up



Courtesy of Amesbury Public Library.

Advertisement for the different styles of carriages manufactured in Amesbury, signed by 25 carriage makers.



Courtesy of Amesbury Public Library.

“The Twins” by Samuel Rowell.

his easel in temporary studios. He charged \$1.00 for a large sketch and 50 cents for a smaller sketch. Back in Amesbury, he sketched local scenes. He painted a portrait of fellow Quaker John Greenleaf Whittier, who evidently encouraged Rowell in his talent.

During the 1850’s Rowell supplemented his earnings as a portrait and landscape artist by painting houses and ships. From 1862–1869 he was superintendent of painting at the Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Navy Yard. In 1870, he began “Samuel Rowell and Sons, Carriage Business,” a sure investment at that time. Later he turned the business over to his four sons and returned to his primary love, portrait and landscape painting.

Portraits signed “S. Rowell” still hang in the homes of residents of Amesbury and neighboring towns. Amesbury Public Library proudly displays a painting of “The Twins,” Jacob and Abby, Rowell’s first-born. The late Miss Mary Rebecca Rowell, the artist’s niece, was once interviewed about the uncle she fondly remembered.

“When Uncle Sam gave his time wholly to [portrait and landscape] painting,” she said, “he had an uneasy feeling that he was betraying his early [religious] training. When he was at his busiest, manufacturing carriages, he was beset by doubts as to the wisdom of stifling the talent which had been entrusted him. . . . Perhaps he handled his problem in the best way possible, under the circumstances. He made an excellent living for his family by his business activities and gave expression to his instinct for beauty by his [portrait and landscape] painting.” (“Samuel Rowell, 1815–1890: Amesbury’s First Professional Artist,” p. 4.) Quaker, carriage maker, artist, Samuel

Rowell was representative of Amesbury’s unique citizens.

The more well-known Quaker, John Greenleaf Whittier, was born in 1807 on a farm in Haverhill, a half-day’s carriage ride from the Friends’ Meeting House in Amesbury. Young “Greenleaf” was sensitive, frail and unsuited to the hard physical life of a farmer, and often took breaks from his chores to write poetry. His Uncle Moses taught him natural lore, and his mother, Abigail, taught him about the goodness of God. On many a cold winter night she gathered her four children before the wide fireplace and told them sad tales about the kidnapping and selling into slavery of Negro children.

By the time Whittier moved to Amesbury in 1836, he had earned a solid reputation as poet and abolitionist. He championed the causes of the less fortunate: the Negro slaves, the overworked mill workers, the fledgling women authors who, without his encouragement, might not have made it on their own.

Whittier’s presence in Amesbury may have attracted others of his faith. The present Friends’ Meeting House, which stands at the junction of Friend and Greenleaf Streets, was built in 1851 according to Whittier’s design. The poet, as well as Jacob Huntington and his three brothers, served on the building committee. The Quakers contributed to Amesbury’s reputation as a quiet, cultural community.

The first Quakers to arrive in Massachusetts from England in the mid-1600’s, however, were far from welcome. Their books were burned, they were imprisoned and sometimes tortured, and laws were passed forbidding ship captains from transporting them from England. Efforts to persecute them backfired. They came in

greater numbers and preached more zealously than before.

In the historical annals of Amesbury, it is not uncommon to discover someone who was either a Quaker himself or related to a Quaker. Isaac Barnard, a prominent member of the Society of Friends in the late 1800’s, bequeathed funds to build the Amesbury Public Library. His mother, Mary Currier Barnard, was the aunt of Nathaniel Currier, partner of the famous lithographic team of Currier and Ives.

Nathaniel Currier spent his summers in Amesbury as a child with an uncle, Thomas Currier. Later, in the early 1860’s, he built an elegant summer home there. For the next 25 years, Amesbury residents expectantly awaited the arrival of the tall, lean gentleman and his wife Lura. They were a friendly, likeable couple.

Orphaned shortly after his birth in 1813 in Roxbury, near Boston, Currier was raised by another uncle. At 15, he was apprenticed to a Boston printmaker who was experimenting with lithography, a new printmaking process. The young man learned his trade well and seven years later opened his own shop in Boston. Using the lithographic process, in which a drawing is made on the surface of a porous stone with a wax-based crayon, acid poured on the stone to eat away all but the drawing, and the resultant relief surface inked and printed on paper, Currier printed advertising signs and calling cards. He was not content, however, with these simple printing jobs.

He moved his business to New York City and began making prints of popular events, such as, the building of the railroads, whaling adventures, boxing matches, and the marriage of Tom Thumb. He was joined by James Ives,



“The Road — Winter” depicting Nathaniel & Lura Currier.

whose lively imagination complemented Currier's industry, and before long the new firm of Currier and Ives became printmaker for the nation.

Like their contemporary, Jacob Huntington, Currier and Ives had discovered a marketable product. Their inexpensive prints were suitable for newlyweds to hang in their parlors or families to paste in their scrapbooks. The pictures were of idyllic country scenes or of stirring, history-making events. Not surprisingly, scenes of rural Amesbury, such as the one titled "The Road — Winter," were among the most popular. Nathaniel Currier repaid the town for the many happy summers spent there by selling prints of its picturesque beauty across the nation.

An Amesbury resident by the name of Harriet Farley devoted her life to easing the burdens of her fellow man. The daughter of Rev. Stephen Farley, a school teacher and itinerant preacher who finally settled in Amesbury in the 1840's, Harriet was moved by conditions in the numerous textile mills along the Merrimack River.

With permission from the mill owners, Miss Farley taught the young women working in the mills to read and write in their few free hours. She collected funds to publish a small magazine, titled *The Factory Girl's Garland*, which included introductory remarks by her and essays and poems written by the girls. She earned no pay except the gratitude of her pupils.

The textile mills in nearby Lowell were at that time the largest in the country. The owners, hearing about Miss Farley's success in Amesbury, hired her to work among the girls there. In time they helped finance the magazine, offered prizes for the best contributions, and built the girls a meeting house. In her own lifetime Harriet Farley, friend, advisor and self-appointed social worker to the needy, became known affectionately as "The Angel of the Mills."

Another Amesbury resident who helped to better the plight of the mill workers was George E. McNeill, born in Amesbury in 1837. As a boy he went to work in the carding room of the Salisbury and Amesbury Woolen Company. His father was an abolitionist, a friend of Whittier's, and young George was quick to sympathize with the adult laborers. Their work day ran from 5 a.m. to 7 p.m., with a break for breakfast at seven, for lunch at noon, and a 15-minute break at 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Wages were \$2 to \$5 a week.

On May 31, 1852, the already

oppressive conditions in the textile mill suddenly worsened. A new agent for the mill owners, a Mr. Derby, sent notice that the 15-minute breaks would be discontinued and that workers could no longer leave the mill at noon. Some of the workers took the noon hour to go home for lunch. The notice precipitated the "Great Derby Strike," one of the earliest documented strikes in the labor movement.

The following day most of the workers walked off their jobs and marched to the home of Mr. Derby, whom they loudly booed. Young George, then a youth of fourteen, joined the strikers. He organized the workers his own age into a group — an early labor union of sorts, encouraged them to meet frequently, and conducted non-violent street parades for worker's rights.

Although supported by resolutions composed by Whittier and signed by many Amesbury citizens, the Great Derby Strike itself failed. The mill owners replaced most of the strikers with immigrant workers. Not until 1865, thirteen years later, did the Massachusetts Legislature vote into law a ten-hour work day.

George McNeill was not easily discouraged, however. In Amesbury and later in Boston he continued to work for the rights of laborers. Although he became an outspoken leader of organized labor in New England, McNeill never resorted to violence. Described by friends as "sweet natured," he was also a part-time poet.

At the time of McNeill's passing in 1909, Rev. Frank O. Hall described him as a man ". . . who, by his loving helpful life and sweetness and simplicity of character . . . proved himself worthy both of respect and affection. . . . It is impossible to estimate how much he did for the advancement of the common people, and although his energy and his work accomplished much, the influence of his character . . . accomplished more." (*Amesbury News*, August 14, 1968.)

In the 1860's, a young woman in her twenties named Harriet Prescott Spofford (who lived on Deer Island on the Merrimack River between Amesbury and Newburyport) surprised James Russell Lowell, the editor of the prominent New York-based magazine,

the *Atlantic Monthly*, with the bright originality of her prose. Her short story, "In a Cellar," quickly placed her among the best writers of her day. In her eighty-third year, in reply to an admirer of her latest poetry, she wrote: "I thank you . . . for your very kind words about my own verses. I wish they deserved them. But I suppose if one ever quite reaches the desired standard, that day growth stops." (*Amesbury News*, October 15–16, 1969.)

The mid-1800's were, perhaps, some of the most productive years in Amesbury. New carriages, affordable to the common man from the thriving manufacturing businesses on "Carriage Hill," rolled along the yet unpaved streets. John Greenleaf Whittier welcomed literary figures into his home. Nathaniel Currier, in his summer home, planned his latest lithographic prints. And in the textile mills, Harriet Farley patiently taught the mill girls to read and write. So while Amesbury could be characterized as a town bursting with new ideas, it also provided a peaceful atmosphere in which such ideas could come to fruition.

Cynthia L. Shaw

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