

Yarmouth History Center Newsletter

Fall 2022

118 East Elm Street, Yarmouth, Maine

207-846-6259

100+ Years of the V.I.S.: Reflecting on the Early Years of Community Building By Sarah Dressel, Yarmouth History Center Summer Intern

This summer I had the pleasure of being a summer intern with the Yarmouth Historical Society. During my six weeks, I spent my time leafing through the history center's intimidatingly large file cabinets, demolding old wallets, and pondering the mysterious background of a wooden zebra in the museum's storage. My fellow intern, Jocelyn Ruffner, and I spent our days deep in donation boxes for hours, coming across scraps of wallpaper and the occasional World War II ration book. One of my fondest memories from this experience was poring over an aged scrapbook with articles about events in Yarmouth going back to the early 1910s. As I entertained different topics for my research paper, the Village Improvement Society of Yarmouth (V.I.S.) piqued my interest. I knew that I had found the topic I had been searching for after learning that my late grandmother, Doris Dressel, had been a faithful member since moving to Yarmouth in 1998. The Village Improvement Society of Yarmouth has been an active group for over 100 years. This year marks the volunteer group's last. I wanted to reflect on their early days.

The V.I.S. started in 1911, "*To make Yarmouth a better place to live in*", founded by female anti-suffragist Harriet Bird. For more information on Harriet's life read Ava Jutras' 2021 Wellcome Prize essay found on the Historical Society's website. Bird went on to be the president of the V.I.S. for 21 years, a group where only women could be active members. In its early days, the V.I.S. held annual balls, inviting Maine Governor William Haines and his wife to the Masonic Hall (where Gather restaurant is now). They also held a yearly midsummer festival beginning in 1911, later featuring an event known as Old Home Day. Bird went on to plan multiple town beautification projects, including the initial clean-up and creation of the Grand Trunk station park. The V.I.S. aimed to inspire community pride and connection in Yarmouth. The Village Improvement Society, following the leadership of Harriet Bird, aimed to "*put Yarmouth in line with other wide awake and progressive communities*". I find it fascinating to ret-



Above: Photograph of Clean up Day Parade circa 1916

respectively examine Bird's beliefs about the role of women in society with this goal in mind. The V.I.S. joined forces with the Board of Trade of Yarmouth on May 11th, 1914, to host Yarmouth's first Clean-Up Week, a tradition that would continue for the next few years.

In a written announcement, the event organizers urged that "*the efforts of all be directed during this week to remove rubbish from out-buildings and yards; that ashes be hauled off or otherwise disposed of; that fences be repaired as far as possible; that all boards, lumber and wood which have been discarded or thrown out to decay be collected and utilized for fire wood; that papers, fruit skins, bottles, tin boxes and other unsightly articles be removed from the road and gutters in front of each one's premises...*" The Yarmouth Clean-Up Week began with a goal to instill town pride through a parade composed of 500 children. The procession started at the old high school building (where the current Town Hall stands) and disbanded in front of the Grand Trunk station. One division of the parade wore white aprons, hats, and carried brooms. Among the parade were fifers and percussionists. Onlookers in the crowd held banners with slogans such as, "*Wake Up, Rake Up*" and "*Away With Rubbish*". Through this tradition, a public "dump" was consolidated, improving the previously rampant problem of townsfolk leaving

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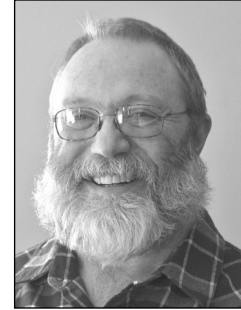
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From the Chair

When I was in college, we used to have free movie nights every Friday and Saturday. The college would show 2 movies a weekend in the largest auditorium on campus. Some of them were new runs, some of them classics, and some were foreign films with subtitles. Sometimes the film would break, requiring the projectionist to re-thread the reel before the movie could start again.

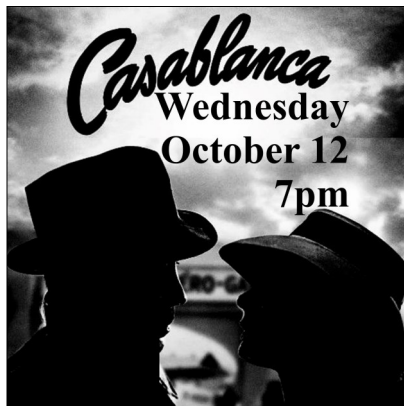


Every once in a while the reels were put on out of order. It did not matter, it was all part of the fun. I tried to get to them all and I fondly remember the glow of light and clicking sound from the projector. It was a great way to escape into another world for a bit.

Beginning this fall and continuing into the winter the Yarmouth Historical Society is teaming up with Merrill Memorial Library and Kinonik to offer a slate of classic film screenings.

Films will be projected from 16mm film, not a digital version. These screenings are free and open to all at Yarmouth History Center.

Binks Colby-George
Chair, Board of Trustees



Wednesday is Movie Night

We are excited to partner with Merrill Memorial Library and Kinonik to offer a slate of film screenings this fall and winter. Films will be projected from 16mm film, not a digital version. Join us for an evening together in the glow (and sound) of a real projector!

Films will be screened at the Yarmouth History Center.

- | | | |
|-------------|--------|------------------------------|
| October 12 | 7:00pm | Casablanca |
| November 9 | 7:00pm | Sunset Boulevard |
| December 14 | 7:00pm | It's A Wonderful Life |
| January 11 | 7:00pm | Sullivan's Travels |
| February 8 | 7:00pm | Trouble in Paradise |



Gaining Perspective from Surprising Sources

By Jocelyn Ruffner, Yarmouth History Center Summer Intern

When I first began my summer internship with the Yarmouth Historical Society, I was very sure of my path of study: I would singlehandedly uncover the (not-so) hidden crimes of the Royall family, travel back in time and explore the indigenous tribes who lived here before us, and overall research and revolutionize public understanding of justice issues in Yarmouth, Maine. Before me, the unenlightened of my small town would bow before my knowledge and cry out in thanks for the history I'd so generously gifted them - all in six weeks' work. Instead, I read about wallpaper. I would say the two experiences are about the same.

If I'm to share my profound thoughts of self-discovery through wallpaper, though, first my plan of total historical domination failing must be explored. The beginning of the end took place shortly after I stepped through the door, when Katie Worthing, executive director of the Historical Society who gave me the chance to have all the experiences I've had this summer in hiring me, decided a scrapbook needed indexing. Thrown into the wild and man-eat-man world of the Historical Society, I latched on to the life preserver that was Frances Coombs' scrapbook. This did not at all fit into my 10 point plan to conquer Yarmouth and the world beyond, but I had to start somewhere, and where I was told to start might as well be the place.

The first page, I could deal with. It talked of the Lawrence Welk show and the Lennon sisters, which was mildly interesting in creating a picture of the sixties in which the book was formed - this is who we watch on television. The second page, with an article about birdwatching and summer activities, I could also manage - this is what we do. Page by page and article by article, what the town of Yarmouth, or at least Coombs' Yarmouth, cared about came into focus.

It was incredibly boring, and incredibly interesting. I didn't much care for the lists of people and the bake sales and plays they took part in, but before my eyes, I saw the high school I attend now being built. I saw a robbery take place, summer fairs come together, and people get married. Through the eyes of Coombs, I saw what the world looked like. I wasn't sure what to make of it. There is no mention of politics in this world, besides a full-page photo of President Eisenhower, the only photo in color in the entire scrapbook. I

had come to this internship fresh off of a year of AP U.S. History, and was ready to flex my historical muscles, yet nothing of what I learned of the decade was reflected in what I saw in the scrapbook. The radical social change that often defines the sixties seemed completely missing. Was this, too, how Coombs saw the world? How Yarmouth saw the world? Of course, this was only one person's curated collection, and so I turned to *The Shopping Notes* with the question of how local news and national news would compare.

In the search for a Yarmouth that was a major political and cultural powerhouse, I was sorely disappointed. *The Notes*, found digitally on the Yarmouth Historical Society's website, was incredibly expansive, but can be summed up in a single word: ads. This is not to be surprising to anyone who knows much about the role *The Notes* played, or simply anyone who can infer from the name that it might have something to do with shopping, but it was surprising to me. I wanted desperately to find something of importance, but my definition of importance stopped me from doing so. In trying to make Yarmouth and its history something it was not, I missed what local history could actually offer.

My use of *The Notes* best exemplifies this: in searching for articles about the civil rights movement and how the people of Yarmouth were interacting with it, I skimmed through hundreds of advertisements. How rude of them, I thought, to be in my way. I had very important world changing things to discover, and how was I supposed to do that when drowning in ads. After a while, though, one has to wonder if perhaps the bombardment of advertisements in *The Notes* is what they're supposed to be looking at if nothing else is turning up. Or, to rephrase: perhaps in the realm of local history, one should actually pay attention to local history, instead of searching for a bigger picture where it may not be coming into form.

That does not mean I didn't find reflections on national movements and local attitudes, but just that their rarity itself meant something. There is no such thing as a local history that isn't reflective of a bigger picture, just a local history that isn't aware of how outside forces affect it - to ignore this would be to ignore the reality of the situation. Even the absence of something is indicative of a larger story, as was the case with my research.

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In and Around the History Center

Meet Grave Atwood, Our New Museum Assistant

As a longtime lover of history, I'm excited to be working at the History Center. An early love of fantasy novels created my interest in how and why the world develops the way that it does. This curiosity contributed to my fascination with the minutia of historical life. When I was young, I had the opportunity to travel to the north of France. This trip kick started my interest in history. Experiencing historical locations and objects in person made a distant account of wars and dynastic shifts a much more immediate reality.

Since I started studying history, I have been fascinated with the daily aspects of historical life. So often all that is taught in history are the wars and the monumental historical events. It's all too easy to lose track of the people who are still living their lives throughout these events. It can be difficult to make a personal connection with history when studying the wider movements of cultural and political bodies. It's much easier when looking at pictures of nine-year-old King Tutankhamun's tunic with ducks embroidered on it.

Studying fashion history can be a fantastic avenue of personal connection to history. It can be difficult to study a garment and not imagine how it would feel to wear it. Even in an era of fast fashion and ready-to-wear clothing it's easy to understand how people choose clothing based on their lifestyles. Thanks to this required focus on utility, a person's clothing can say a lot about how they lived, some garments, such as corsets and stays, could even form to the wearer's body.

I recently graduated from the University of Southern Maine with a bachelors in Art History,



Above: Grave working on *Investigating a Dress*

a field that drew my interest for a similar reason. More specifically, I have studied late medieval and Renaissance Christian art, artifacts, and architecture with an interest in conservation and display of historical artifacts. This includes considerations of what should be in a museum versus what should be kept in churches for display.

All in all, the more obscure and potentially insignificant a historical detail, the better for me. Local history is just as important as national and global history and I very much look forward to working with local Yarmouth history.

Yarmouth's Marble Billboards

Historian Ron Romano joined us on in June to share his extensive knowledge about Maine's billboard markers. We began the program in the old Meetinghouse on Hillside Street and continued in the cemetery for a walking tour.

An interesting collection of nineteenth-century grave-markers exists in the cemeteries of Maine. Romano calls them "billboard" markers, and the typical ones consist of large signboard-like marble slabs held above ground by granite posts. Forty-two of these markers have been found in Maine, and Yarmouth is the fortunate home of two, both of which are at the Old Baptist Cemetery.



Above: Ron Romano in the Meetinghouse

Ron Romano is a cemetery historian from Portland and author of four cemetery-themed books currently available in our gift shop. Thanks to Yarmouth Municipal Television, this program is now available to watch on demand! Visit our website for the link to this presentation.

In and Around the History Center

Serendipity Strikes Again!

In the 1950s Mr. and Mrs. Frank E. Morse came to Yarmouth and serendipitously ran into William Rowe. He invited them into his library, opened a page in his book, and began to read about her great-great grandparents Dr. David and Elizabeth Jones. Morse wrote about that auspicious occasion because it had achieved her dream of connecting to her Revolutionary ancestors.

This summer the History Center provided a similar experience to Martha and Roger Sparwasser during their visit to the Center. When Martha Sparwasser inquired about Dr. and Elizabeth Jones the staff was able to instantly produce an article, *Ancestral Mission Accomplished*, published in 1957 in the *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine*, and written by Martha's grandmother, Mrs. Frank E. Morse.

After traveling from Minnesota to Hartwick, NY, Morse used the 1839 diary of her great-great grandmother, Mary Jones Hale, to retrace the route Mary took to Yarmouth with her husband, one horse, and a light wagon. Like her great-great grandmother, Morse kept a diary of her trip and used it as a resource for her article.

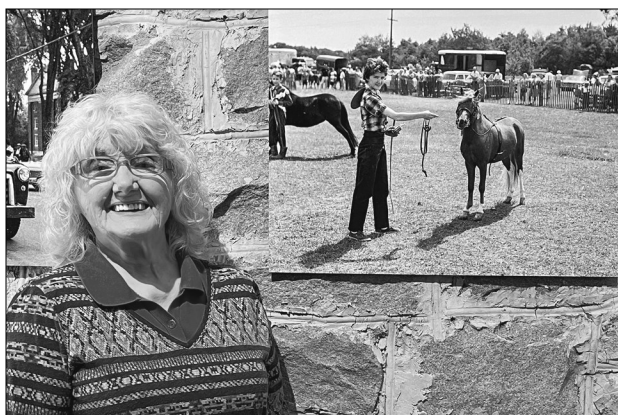
Coincidentally, the staff had been discussing the article only days before the Sparwassers' visit. The DAR article had recently turned up while researching Dr. David and Elizabeth Jones, characters appearing in this year's production of *Stroll Haunted Yarmouth*.



Above: Summer visitors Martha and Roger Sparwasser retrace ancestors' steps

Mrs. Morse concluded her DAR article with *"I have written my diary hoping my daughter and her children will some day take the trip there, too."* Martha Sparwasser fulfilled Morse's wish of having a descendent of hers visit Yarmouth, Maine.

Another ancestral mission accomplished!



Faces in the Crowd

This summer's photography exhibit of Yarmouth's Visitors Days of 1959 brought in plenty of visitors. Some found themselves in the photographs while others volunteered to help identify and name the people in the crowd.



Above: Rick Wile helps Director Katie Worthing identify people in the 1959 Visitors Days photographs
Above left: Jane Small Plante poses with her photograph

Gaining Perspective *Continued from page 3*

The lack of stories about the momentous movements of the era tells me who lived in Maine, or at the very least whose voices were valued and given space. At the same time, focusing on that absence, on what was not pictured, meant I didn't see what was pictured. I was focusing on all the things Yarmouth wasn't, instead of what it was. Both are important, but during my research, I found them hard to balance. The voices that weren't there, that weren't being heard - these voices and narratives that have been erased by history are of the utmost importance to find and lift up. If you don't find them, though, do you ignore what is there and relegate it as unimportant?

I simply didn't know how to handle local history that wasn't directly reflective of the national trends I was familiar with. I dug through *The Notes* for it, eager to reveal the sordid history of Yarmouth, and found myself with a history that was both local and not. Between the ads and announcements of events, I found articles from people of Maine encouraging peers to support racial justice legislation, with an article penned by Senator Edmund Muskie, May 28, 1964, explaining what such legislation would mean in hopes of garnering support for it. This was what I was hoping for - a sign that Yarmouth and Maine were affected by the goings on elsewhere, that national and local news took place on the same plane of existence! While most of the narratives were placating of white fears that equality would change something for them, and I didn't find voices from the oppressed communities, I saw local history in a way I hadn't before - these were people reaching out to their communities around them. These were local citizens, hoping to help create change. I saw evidence of the resistance to this change as well - people who thought Maine had no business hopping on the wave of civil rights legislation being passed and characterized such legislation as corrupt. A September 16, 1963, article argues that civil rights legislation by the Supreme Court lays on "dubious constitutional grounds" and is part of an overall trend of the "most detested and flagrant of governmental abuses". Meanwhile, another article, penned June 26, 1969, characterizes affirmative action as the "lowering of educational standards in hitherto strict and high standards colleges a result of unprepared and often disinterested student enrollments and the necessity for giving them the demanded degree". Maine, I was coming to realize, and the small town in which I lived, could not be so easily put in a box. Looking back, it should not be surprising that Maine could hold multifacet-

ed ideas about the state of the nation, when today we are still a state torn between different opinions about what our future should look like.

Choosing what our past looks like is just as much a choice as what our future looks like. It doesn't feel that way, when the future is yet to come and the past is chronicled in our history textbooks, but all texts have a narrative. Coming into my time with the Yarmouth Historical Society, I was eager to paint the past in black. In its own way, this urge is selfish - if everything that's happened in the past is wrong, and moral deficiency is a characteristic of existing then, then therefore simply by existing in the present I am good and right. That is not to say that I was consciously thinking this way, but rather that a binary is created that doesn't allow for issues of the present to be explored when badness is something that exclusively belongs to the past.

Reading *The Notes*, I was thrilled to cast my judgment, as the few articles I saw about what I deemed important issues were swathed in advertisements. It read as if the people of Yarmouth did not care about an issue that was life and death for millions of people across the country at the time. How vain were they, with their advertisements and commercial wants? How vain am I, to think we of the present are much different? It is this reflection that leaves me with questions: can I judge my historical counterparts for what I am also guilty of - how many issues do our newspapers not reflect? Who's to say that *The Shopping Notes*, founded by Ken Larrabee in 1952 to promote his after-Christmas sale, should be judged for their commercial pursuits when that's ultimately what it was for? If all someone 100 years from now read from 2022 was *People Magazine*, would they not think the same about us? After my dive into *The Notes*, I'm left wishing our past was different, that the town of Yarmouth was filled with social justice innovators and advocates on the front line of the civil rights movement. I'm also left with the understanding that to begrudge local news and history for reflecting just that is unfair, and that to call a focus on one's own life and history selfish is ironic when I have spent my entire summer doing just that.

In conclusion: wallpaper. My battle with it first began in the Coombs scrapbook, where three separate times I came across articles about R.B. Dunning and Co.'s unique and lovely wallpaper from Japan. Its texture, materials, build, colors were described in depth - you could practically order it right from the page! It was surely an ad, and

Continued from previous page

I was horrified and thrilled to realize the sanctity of history had been, as I perceived it, breached. How biased, how terrible, how delightful! Reading how a company was trying to influence the public, as if we are not surrounded by advertisements today, filled me with a perverse glee - truly, I was uncovering horrors.

100+ Years of the V.I.S.

Continued from page 1

trash on roadsides. In March 1916, Yarmouth was included in a list of 15 towns that submitted the best reports of civic improvement to the *New England Clean Up and Paint Up* committee. Yarmouth was the only Maine town to make this distinction list. This venture was just one of the multiple town-improvement programs the V.I.S. organized over the years.

In 1917, the year the United States joined World War I, the V.I.S. was active in creating community events in support of war efforts. The Yarmouth Board of Trade and the V.I.S. held a wartime supper in January 1918, following the wartime food restrictions of the F.D.A. and the Hoover administration. This event, during a time in which fuel and food consumption were limited, helped to instill Yarmouth with national pride under the burden of war overseas. In May 1918, the Clean Up Week parade included representatives of the nearby Red Cross branch, afterwards, a blood drive was opened to benefit service members.

The town of Yarmouth was presented a service flag by the V.I.S. in November 1918. The flag bore 102 stars. Three of the stars were gold; representing sacrifice. Additionally, the two gold crosses represented suffering. All stars on the flag memorialized Yarmouth boys who had responded to the call to defend democracy by joining the war. The flag was unfurled over the steps of Merrill Memorial Library.

After the end of WWI, Yarmouth returned to a sense of normalcy. In August 1922, the V.I.S. held its annual town festival (one of the precursors to the Clam Festival), amassing a total of 5000 visitors - the biggest gathering the town had ever seen. The V.I.S. continued to put together social events and community improvement initiatives. It's unfathomable to envision Yarmouth today without the hard work of the women of the V.I.S.



Above: Village Improvement Society displays service flag

Right: Old Home Days Celebration article

To close, the Village Improvement Society of Yarmouth continued to transform, better, and unify the people of Yarmouth for over 100 years. I believe we owe the members of the V.I.S. a debt of gratitude for shaping Yarmouth into what it is today. It would be impossible to list all of the impactful actions of the V.I.S. in one paper. As I finish up the last few days of my internship with the Historical Society, I reflect on my time spent staring over my laptop at the Royal River. I could not be more grateful to learn about the history of the town I call home.



Above: Yarmouth High School students Jocelyn Ruffner and Sarah Dressel, 2022 History Center Summer Interns

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Upcoming Lectures

October 18, 7:00, Zoom

Rebecca White, historian at U of M Augusta Women's Clubs and the Village Improvement Movement. Registration link found at yarmouthmehistory.org.

November 15, time and format TBD

Winners of the Wellcome Prize present their prizewinning papers and films on Cumberland County history. Updates on event at yarmouthmehistory.org



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