ADAPTING TO A NEW REALITY

Welcome to the Summer/Fall 2020 edition of the Bidwell House Museum newsletter. What a year it has been so far! When thinking about this newsletter in late winter, we had plans to talk about our numerous programs and our exciting 30th anniversary celebration. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in us cancelling that celebration along with guided house tours and most in-person programs for 2020. The silver lining, as you will read more about in Board of Trustees President Rob Hoogs letter on the next page, is that this crisis has forced us to be creative and adapt. Four of our summer programs along with our summer party have moved online, making them accessible to many more people than our in-person programs.

Our expanded email newsletters share the Bidwell story to friends as far as California and England. Our new outdoor signage and Bidwell History Primer provide better context for the interesting sites seen on hikes throughout the property. And, this crisis has also shown the staff and Trustees what an incredible group of supporters that we have. Memberships and donations continue to arrive in our mailbox each week and we know that when we finally celebrate our 30th season in 2021, we will be rejoicing that milestone with all of you, our dear friends and supporters. While the house remains closed for now, we continue to monitor the situation and if we do offer any tours this year, you will the first to know. In the meantime, check our website often, sign up for our email newsletters, take a walk in the gardens or a hike on the trails and enjoy all that the Bidwell House Museum has to offer.

As we usually do in our summer issue, we are sharing three research papers completed by some of our 2019 summer interns, starting with Trudy Fadding’s paper at right.

Enjoy!

TINDERBOXES AND FIREMAKING IN 18TH CENTURY AMERICA

by Trudy Fadding

Though fire was an essential element of the colonial American household, starting and maintaining one's source of heat, light, and food was no simple task. It took 15 to 20 cords of wood to keep a fire in a single fireplace, colonists constantly saved their excess tallow and grease for candles, and one of the most difficult and frustrating activities of all was lighting a fire from scratch should the household hearth go out. Thus, in every household, and possibly carried on most persons, was a tinderbox. The most common design being a round box made of tin or brass, exactly like the one found in the Bidwell House Keeping Room.

These boxes might have a candle holder fashioned on the top, a small curved handle, and often contained, besides the tinder itself, a flat round piece of metal with a loop on top called a ‘damper’. The damper fit perfectly inside the box and would be used to put out the tinder after its use. For the traveler or for personal use, an individual might also own a pocket tinder box. This was often a rectangular box which had a piece of steel on the outside for striking. A wealthier colonist or Englishman might be lucky enough to own a flintlock tinder lighter shaped like a pistol. The flintlock functioned similarly to an actual gun, and caused a spark to fall on a bit of ‘punk’ wood to smolder. Finally, some households might simply use their flintlock rifle to create sparks by putting a bit of gunpowder in a flash pan and snapping the flintlock to light the tinder.

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**“SILVER LININGS”**

Bidwell House Museum President’s Message

**2020 is the thirtieth anniversary of the Bidwell House Museum which opened in May 1990.** But the unprecedented situation this year has prevented the museum from “normal operations,” so we’ll be celebrating this milestone in 2021.

The 30th anniversary is usually called the “Pearl” anniversary, but we’ve come to realize this is our “Silver Lining” year. Along with everyone else, we have had to think “outside the box,” and this has been the impetus for us to focus our attention on the substantial part of the museum outside the house: gardens, grounds, walls, trails, and land history. If you haven’t done so already, please come to the museum to enjoy the grounds. The property is open to all year-round during daylight hours at no cost. Although access is free, we hope you’ll consider becoming a member or making a donation to help us continue.

You can peruse the spectacular flower gardens, heirloom vegetable garden, and the new Native American “three sisters” demonstration garden. Ruth Green, the Museum’s amazing head gardener, and Charles Ancecharico, our garden intern, have done a wonderful job. This year, the bounty from the vegetable garden will be donated to the local Food Bank; volunteers are working to nurture the vegetables and will be harvesting them for distribution in the fall.

The Museum’s four miles of trails are in great shape, thanks to trustee Richard Greene and other volunteers. A trail crew from the Greenagers was on site in July to make some more improvements and the Trail Map has been updated and new directional signage has been installed along the trails to make them easier to follow. New historical interpretive signs installed at various locations along the trails, and several new interpretive trails have been opened this year. There is a lot to explore.

A new “Outside-the-House Tour” has been created to allow visitors to take a self-guided tour around the grounds and learn the history of the area, from Native Americans to European Settlement to the present. Families are invited to go on a historical “treasure hunt” of the grounds.

The newly-minted “Bidwell Lore” series has been telling the stories of the Bidwell family members and their roles in the history of the area; thanks in particular to the extensive research and writings of trustee and Bidwell descendant, Rick Wilcox. And we have “gone digital” with our history lecture series. We plan to continue all of these new initiatives in future years, in addition to the on-the-ground programs, house tours, and other events you’ve enjoyed in previous years.

Finally, we have completed the museum’s five-year-long building project for Historic Preservation, Visitor Enhancements, and Accessibility Improvements. Previous phases of this work included a complete structural overhaul and restoration of the historic house, with new roofs and gutters, a fresh coat of paint, new electrical wiring and upgraded lighting, relocating the utilities to underground, and drainage improvements. We also made the Museum accessible while preserving the historic appearance of the house. The final phase of the building project was completed this year, including the installation of a floor in the carriage barn to make it accessible, and much nicer – though intentionally left rustic – for exhibits and small lectures. New displays were installed and provisions made for a video display. A small kitchenette was created including a faucet for filling water bottles. Inside the house, several doorways were widened for wheelchair accessibility, the restroom was completely redone for accessibility, and the 1840s room received new lighting and freshening-up for rotating exhibits.

None of this work would have been possible without the amazing financial support of our members and donors, and matching grants from The Fitzpatrick Foundation, the Massachusetts Historical Commission, and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Thank you!! We are waiting with bated breath for the time when we can safely and comfortably reopen the house for tours to show you the finished product.
All of us at the Bidwell House Museum are very grateful for the many “Silver Linings” this year: the hundreds of visitors who have enjoyed the trails, gardens, and grounds, many visiting for the first time; the members who have renewed their memberships in spite of the house being closed for tours; the new members who have joined; and the lecturers and performers whose online offerings have allowed “Bidwellians” from across the country to enjoy our programs.

I would like to express my personal thanks to Heather Kowalski, our intrepid Executive Director, and Erin Hunt, Administrative Manager and resident caretaker, who have gone above and beyond the call of duty to make this season possible and memorable. Thanks also to the fantastic Board of Trustees for your support, resilience, and good humor.

But most of all, we are grateful to you, our members. In this challenging, unprecedented year, you are our true Silver Linings. You make the Bidwell House Museum possible with your generous donations and enthusiastic support. You are also our reason-for-being: to share our passion for exploring history and learning its lessons, so we can all – especially our youth – apply those lessons to the present and future.

Thank you!

Rob Hoogs, President of the Board of Trustees of the Bidwell House Museum

Despite the many different styles of tinderboxes and lighting devices of the 18th century, creating a spark from flint and steel was not easy and took great patience. More important than creating the actual spark, however, was preparing a proper amount of dry, highly flammable tinder for the spark to light. Besides gunpowder, most tinder was some form of plant material, one option being charred plant-fiber cloth such as cotton or linen which could carry a smoldering spark before it was blown into flame. One would certainly find bits of char-cloth in a household tinderbox along with the curved steel and flint for striking. Colonists would also save up bits of handkerchiefs, old sheets, and any unusable linen material to save specifically for charring.

Although char-cloth, gunpowder, and punk wood are perfect for creating a small coal out of a spark, more flammable forms of tinder would also be necessary to create a flame. Flax in its unprocessed form known as ‘swinging-tow’ or just ‘tow’ could be used for this purpose. Tow is the leftover flax after the spinnable flax was removed for making linen. A big bundle of tow would work excellently for creating a flame from smoldering gunpowder or char-cloth. Colonists might also use thin strips of birch bark, or wood shavings to induce flame.

Another possible method to be used in conjunction with flint and steel would have been sulfur matches. Friction matches themselves weren’t invented until 1827, and weren’t widely used until the 1830s, but sulfur matches could be lit from smoldering tinder during the 18th century. These matches were simply thin sticks, pointed at both ends, and dipped in sulfur. Known as ‘spunks’, they were similarly finicky and as difficult to use as any other fire lighting method of this time period, but once lit they were perfect for lighting a candle, a pipe, or the fireplace.
EARLY AMERICAN BURIALS AND GRAVE MARKERS
By Nadia Makuc

During the 18th century the early mortality rate was much higher than today, even more so in “frontier” communities such as Township #1. This was due to a variety of causes including lack of knowledge about germs, strenuous labor, climate, famine, and lack of current medical knowledge. Once one died, a death inventory would be taken of the deceased’s possessions in order to settle debts.

Cemeteries were located up to a mile away from the meetinghouse, as they were civil ceremonies rather than religious. In very well off families elaborate rings which occasionally contained inscriptions were distributed to family and to the minister which also created business for smiths. Rings could be passed down through generations as heirlooms. Ministers discouraged this type of lavish spending and it became such a serious issue that in 1741 Massachusetts made a law which fined fifty pounds for distribution of rings to pall bearers and clergy.

Gravestones before the late 17th century are rare, and difficult to find due to the fact that most markers were made of wood or the graves were simply left unmarked. Gravestone carvers did not always enough business for a full-time occupation so they often worked as masons, cordwainers, braizers, or wood carvers. Before 1800 there were 127 documented carvers in New England, some covering as far as a thirty mile radius. In the 1730s it would have cost about twelve shillings for a gravestone. This would have been three weeks of work for Reverend Adonijah Bidwell, and he was well off, so this was quite an expensive affair.

Each carver and locale had their own unique style and traditions that developed over time, although there were general trends which included three phases of markings. Parts of New England could be as far as fifty years behind the styles of England. New trends developed from Cambridge, a liberal educational city, where Massachusetts grave markings were developed based on English influence and change in religious focus. Rural areas developed unique markings, as isolation from outside influences led to creative changes, but then there were drastic differentiations when they started to integrate outside trends. Geography determined the styles of gravestones.

Throughout the 18th century there were three main symbols on gravestones. Starting before the 1700s winged death’s head was the most popular. A Puritan symbol, it was a reminder of the inevitable. Words usually were as simple as “here lies,” and this became the symbol of Orthodox Puritans. Different areas were able to develop this and create slightly differing designs, including a Medusa looking creature in Plympton. Often the heads were grinning although, over time, designs became less elaborate and different aspects were left up to interpretation. Throughout the 18th century conservatives and high ranking elites, especially in Boston continued using the death’s head, as a sign of orthodoxy.

One variation of death’s head which began to permeate New England was a cherub. The angels varied only slightly in look, maintaining the wings and only changing the face, but the message was completely different. Inscriptions began to include “Here lies the body of” which focused on the idea that the soul was in Heaven. This gained popularity after The Great Awakening in the mid 18th century when people began to stray from strict Puritan ideals and saw reunification with God as a glorious event. From the perspective of Orthodox Puritans, this violated idolatry. Gravestones began changing to rectangular shapes, rather than rounded shoulders, and they became a mark of memorialization and commemoration.
appearing even when the bodies were not there. The individual’s achievements and roles began to be included, celebrating their life and symbolizing growing secularism. The overall message in epitaph became more comforting rather than scary, as well as diverging from Puritan roots.

The final popular motif, willow tree and urn, began its rise to popularity in the late 1700s. This was an even further step away from religion and a movement towards secularism and commemoration. Gravestones became memorials to the dead with achievements and symbolisms to be remembered by. In areas close to Boston, where the divide of which symbol to use was unclear, young children who died would be commemorated by death’s head and adults would have a cherub. In these cases the gravestone design would have been chosen by the opposite age, a clear sign of the generational differences. In New England, areas fell into categories over which motif used; Rhode Island, a colony focused on religious freedom, quickly transitioned to cherubs, whereas the Connecticut River Valley, which was rich with agriculture, followed a similar path to Boston and retained death’s head until the late 18th century. The choice of design signified one’s political and religious standings, as well as area and carver.

Reverend Adonijah Bidwell and eight members of his family are buried in Woods Cemetery, or Henwood Cemetery on Mt. Hunger Road, named after the late adjacent neighbor, Henry Woods. Originally called “Old Center Grounds,” it was the first cemetery in Township #1. The earliest marker dates back to 1756, and it continued to be in use until 1829. The Bidwell family, along with the Brewers, Jacksons, and Garfields are the only ones located on the crest of the hill, a possible sign of importance and prominence. The same carver, Abraham Collins, made the cherub for Reverend Bidwell, his wife Jemima, and eight other gravestones in the cemetery, a typical motif. His works can also be found in six other surrounding towns.

Looking at the traditions surrounding death and gravestones can be a window into Colonial America’s relationship with religion and outlook on the world. The motifs and their meaning, as well as usage and cultural implications can reveal the implications of one’s standing as well as beliefs, an implication of the larger cultural outlook.

Ultimately, lighting a fire with a tinderbox took a great deal of patience, and a carefully designed set of actions in order to achieve a successful fire. First, one would open the tinderbox and take out the flint and steel. Holding the flint in one hand, the steel would be struck against the flint in a downward motion over the tinderbox which contained a piece of charred cloth. Then, with any luck, a spark would eventually fall into the box and catch on the cloth. At this point, the cloth could be taken out with fingers or tongs, held to flammable tinder such as the tow, bark, or a sulfur match, and blown until the tiny coal lit into flames. Once there were certain flames, the excess cloth could be returned to the tinderbox and put out with the damper. Such a process could take anywhere from 10 minutes to over an hour depending on the preparedness and experience of the user.

It’s not surprising, considering the trouble involved in tinderbox use, that sometimes colonists would give up on relighting a fire themselves and instead resort to their neighbors. Unfortunately, ‘neighbors’ would often be a mile or more away, so boys sent out with a burning brand, shovel, covered pan or even a strip of green bark would have to hurry back home without letting the newly acquired coals go out. Though we have no documented stories of the Bidwells encountering the trials and tribulations of fire lighting, the presence of a tinderbox in the house can lead us to imagine them persevering in an effort to revive the fire, or carefully tending the hearth to avoid even opening their tinderbox.
THE MINISTER’S ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY
Grace Makuc

During the eighteenth century, the Massachusetts Bay Colony “frontier” was largely settled by people given land grants. One of the most important roles to be filled in these new communities was the Puritan minister. The minister helped the government back in England by controlling the churches in the new settlements, and they were often be one of the first settlers.

The minister’s lot would often run on the largest road, and would mark the center of town. This showed the ministers importance in the community, but also provided as a source of information for new settlers or travelers. The minister could point colonists towards their new plot of land, but also provide shelter in their early days of arrival. The minister was also expected to provide means for any struggling family in his community. This could include baking the family extra bread if their crop had failed, or providing a warm fire in the cold months of the year.

The main role of the minister was to preach a sermon every Sunday to the people in the community. This would take place at the meeting house or at the church, if one was built. Many of the lots in a town were supposed to be within walking distance, or within a mile, but this did not always occur. The people were required to go to this Sunday service, or they would be fined by the government. The minister was expected to preach his sermon for two to three hours every week on Sunday, as well as a shorter Thursday sermon that was not an obligation for the people. The meetinghouse was often extremely cold or hot during the year, but the minister was required to show up and preach. The minister also was not allowed to repeat any of his sermons, and would be moved and most likely fined if he was caught doing that. A visit from the regional bishop could also be expected at any time of year, along with a certain amount of hospitality and entertainment from the minister’s family.

The importance of marriage in those days was large, and along with the growing population in a town, many new babies were given the sacrament of baptism. During the eighteenth century, the minister was in charge of all the marriages and baptisms of the people from the community. He was required to attend the service and administer the event. The other services the minister would attend were the funerals, many of which were held in the family’s house. The dead were buried and given blessings by the minister.

The minister would often fulfill these duties until he was on his last day of life, even if he was very sick. This bound the minister to stay in town, unless moved by the bishop and government. The family would hold a funeral for the deceased, and then a new minister would take his place in the community. The house was kept in the old minister’s family, often inherited, and the second minister would have a new house built. This was again in the center of town, but the service time of a minister could vary. Some would stay in one community for decades, while others would only be kept in the same church for a year, or even only a few months.

The church thrived during the early stages of colonialism, but the American Revolution changed many things. After the end of the revolution, many of the states voted to split the church and the government, affecting the daily lives of many ministers. With this new split, people were not required to attend church, and the population of churchgoers dropped. The split also opened up the possibilities of new religions, and new churches to be formed.

In the early days of the colonies, when a minister first arrived in a new town he was treated with respect and was an esteemed member of the community. The minister would work all week to prepare his lengthy sermon for the people, and was always positioned at the center of any community. This role slowly changed, by the ever changing life in these communities.
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Your gifts make the Museum the gem it is today and preserve it for tomorrow!

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