

The Chronicle Quarterly

Weston Historical Society

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Weston's First Town Hall

by Karin Giannitti

In October 1787, the Connecticut General Assembly voted to create the town of Weston, carving it out from what were then the parishes of Norfield and North Fairfield (now Easton). The General Assembly established November 14, 1787 as the date the first Town Meeting would be held. It called for the meeting to be held at "the Public Meeting House in the Parish of North Fairfield."

Its first order of business was to find a central location for Town Meetings. The town fathers formed a committee, but took no action. The result was that Weston drifted on, as before, for about one hundred years without a town hall.

There were records to keep - deeds and other official documents, but no secure central location, like today's vault at Town Hall. Using Yankee ingenuity, town officials solved this problem. They stored all documents in the homes of town officials. As a result, town records were scattered around town.

As the 19th century progressed, so did Weston, becoming a more diverse community. With it came the ever increasing need for a town hall. In 1883, a committee was formed, with representation from each of the town's six school districts. Their task was to select a location and oversee construction. The sum of \$500 was



appropriated for the building, which was constructed on land behind Norfield Church, given by Thaddeus Burr, who was one of the earliest settlers of Fairfield. He donated land to Norfield Parish for militia drills and a school in the late 1700s.

The new town hall was a plain wooden building, one story, approximately 20 by 40 feet in length. In 1884, Weston voters gathered there for their first Town Meeting. In 1887, the town granted the Norfield Church Society permission to hold meetings there. In 1910, the town allowed the church and the Norfield Grange to expand the hall (in photo new construction is to the left). In 1938, Weston added a wing for the Town Clerk's office.

Among the first of Weston's full time town clerks was Gertrude

Walker. In 1945, she was working for a Norwalk insurance company. She called Weston Town Hall one day looking for a lost deed and spoke to Willard Fanton, then First Selectman. He told her Sarah Treadwell, who was town clerk, was very ill and he was going to look for a replacement. Mrs. Walker said she would be interested and applied for the job. She was appointed to serve out Mrs. Treadwell's term, then elected on her own, a position she held for 38 years.

She remembers the building having a small front office, large vault with "a good heavy door," and a second room with a long table used for land searches. She was appalled to find most of the land records and town papers rolled up into bundles and left around the room. Some records were even left out at night to make room

in the filing cabinets for Red Cross yarn, which had been left over from World War II.

In the beginning, Mrs. Walker received only two-and-a-half days of instruction on how to be a town clerk. Her duties included registering voters (one only had to prove they could read) and filing deeds. She was paid by lawyers for whom she recorded deeds. Only years later was she given a town salary. But, because of her diligence the town soon had a proper filing system for records.

Mrs. Walker's favorite memory of the old building was one harsh winter morning, when she walked from Norfield Road into town hall. She mentioned to Mr. Fanton that she thought paths should be shoveled. He agreed and went out. Soon he returned and presented her with a shovel. Later, the road crew pitched in and shoveled the walk.

In August 1951, there was a spectacular late-night fire that destroyed the building. Although no cause was listed, Mrs. Walker thinks a copper penny used to replace a fuse as the lights were always blowing out was the cause. The fire occurred at an auspicious time for the town. More space was needed, in addition to a home for the firehouse. In 1952, a cornerstone was laid for a new town hall at its current site.

It was dedicated in a formal ceremony on July 5, 1953. In a speech, First Selectman Fanton said: "It is my sincere and earnest hope that wherever destiny may lead, those who shall be charged with the responsibility of administering its (the town's) affairs, may do so wisely and in the interests of all the inhabitants so that 50 to 100 years from now people will say 'Weston is a fine town in which to live.'"



Dear Editor,

Enjoyed reading the winter issue of the Quarterly. Perhaps the society members would like to know just where the "gulf" was and why it isn't a gulf anymore.

Newtown Turnpike was rebuilt by the state in 1957-8. Before the rebuilding, the section from Godfrey Road to the entrance of Ladder Hill North was very narrow and much lower than it is now. The road used to be at the level of the brook and the cliffs came out very close to the road. This was the "gulf." The builders raised the level of the road the entire length, in some places 50 feet or more and also widened the valley. The foundations for the Den School were still in place before this rebuilding. The school was located just to the north of the present entrance of Ladder Hill North. The entrance to Ladder Hill North used to be north of Den School, now it is south of the site. A few yards down the pike there is a wall against the hillside. This is the remains of an old barn where one of the town school buses was kept. The barn was torn down during the road rebuilding.

There were three camps on this section of the turnpike, not just one. Forty years ago, old Mr. Morehouse, Minerva's father (see Chronicle Vol. 13, No. 1), was still driving his buggy with a team of

horses up and down the pike.

The section of the turnpike from the Weston-Redding town line to the bridge at the top end of the reservoir and then Rt. 53 through the glen to Rt. 57 has been designated a scenic highway. The state switched numbers many years ago. Rt. 57 used to be Rt. 53 and Rt. 53 used to be Rt. 57.

The year of the big flood, October 1955, the brook down the gulf was a raging torrent. At the lower end of the gulf the road was completely washed away, along with many other town roads. Minerva kept her father's old team of horses up until about 25 years ago. Mr. Heady kept the big fields in back of their house mowed, fine meadows for the horses.

Very Truly Yours,
Jim Hoe
446 Newtown Turnpike, Weston

P.S. Minerva, when very young, used to spend a lot of time playing at the Perry camp with the campers. She would ride over on one of the farm horses. I would lift her up on the horse.

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Using Probate Records

By Judy M. Darby

Do you ever wonder how historians are able to reconstruct the interiors of museum houses to reflect a particular owner? Inventories found in the probate records of the deceased owner are the key.

If your antique house was its owner's dwelling house at the time of his death, inventory takers appointed by the court were charged with the job of listing and appraising every item owned by the deceased. The purpose was to protect the creditors and heirs. Doing their job correctly meant moving methodically from room to room taking each item in turn. Even centuries later, an entire room can be reconstructed according to its contents. Even after many alterations, the original floor plan of a house can be determined simply by a careful study of an inventory.

To find probate records, you first have to know in what probate district the house was located. Weston probate records from 1835 to the present are at the Westport Town Hall, but between 1832-1834 they are in Bridgeport. Before 1832 they are in Fairfield.

An interesting inventory can be found in the probate papers for Ruel Sherwood, who lived at 125 Weston Road in what was then Weston, but is now Westport. Ruel bought his house in 1799 and lived there until his death in 1844.* Using his inventory, it's fun to imagine being a guest. You would have entered through the front entry. The entry hall had no furniture, but the steep stairs opposite the door were carpeted. You would have been invited into the cozy, carpeted parlor. Even as late as this mid-century date, the parlor served as the master bedroom. You would have seen a feather bed with flannel sheets, bolsters and two

pillows. It was covered with a checkered blanket over which Rachel Sherwood had laid a fine linen coverlet. Beside the bed was a small candlestand with the large family Bible. There was a clock on an old bureau. You would have sat on one of eight Windsor chairs, while Ruel served cider from a decanter on the cherry tea table. Inside a cupboard, plates and silverware were displayed, along with linen towels, sheets, and pillow cases, some serving trays and a mirror. If it were cold, Ruel would have laid a log across a pair of brass andirons and kindled the fire with his shovel and tongs.

Opposite the parlor and front hall was the large kitchen and small adjoining milkroom. There was a table with six chairs, a cupboard with crockery, plates, platters and silverware. There were three iron candlesticks and some pewter pieces on the table. At the cooking fireplace was a pair of andirons, a shovel, tongs and bellows. The milkroom served as a pantry. It contained dozens of kitchen gadgets, including the usual frying pans and kettles.

Like most, Ruel's home was multi-generational. In the 18th and 19th centuries elderly grandparents or a young married couple often lived in a downstairs bedroom sometimes erroneously called a "borning room." The west bedroom in Ruel's house, we believe, belonged to son, William, and

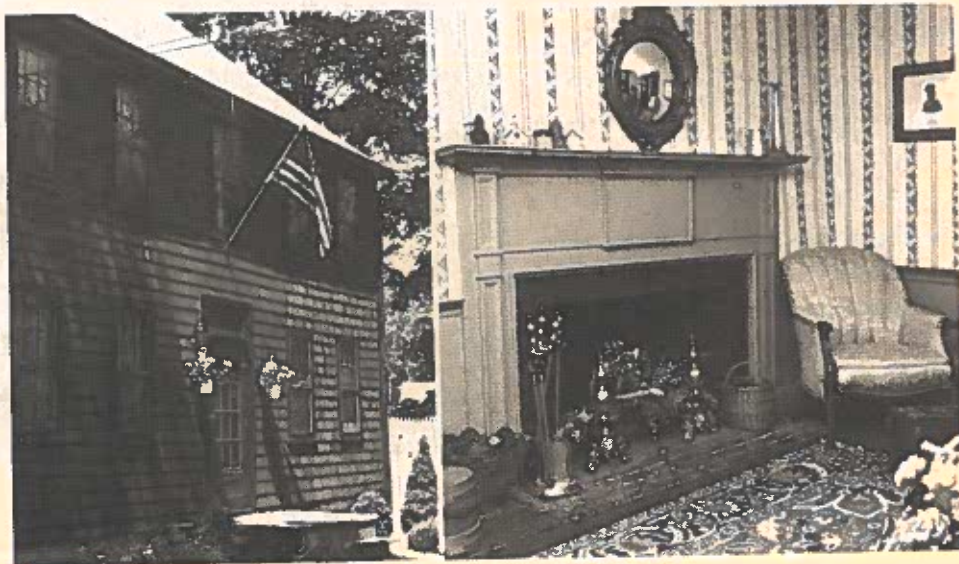
daughter-in-law, Esther. Furnishings in the west bedroom that belonged to Ruel were a bedstead with linens, and a "great chair." The room had a fireplace with small andirons, a pot, and a jug.

Bedrooms on the second floor were called chambers. It appears there were three chambers on Ruel's second floor. Two contained only a bedstead with flannel sheets. Another, also had a chest of drawers with linens, a candlestand and looking glass.

In the garret (attic) was an old bed, a cheese press, Ruel's guns and a side saddle.

In his barn, Ruel kept flax, cider, flour, potatoes, oats, corn and hay, in addition to many farm tools, small mills and presses. His cow house contained "three fat hogs, fifteen turkeys, a bay horse, a pair of oxen, nine head of cattle and thirty-three sheep."

The house Ruel bought in 1799 had been built in 1764 by Nathan Gray, Jr., son of one of Norfield Society's founding members (see Gray Genealogy, below). We can pinpoint the date of the house so exactly because it's in Nathan's deed: "I Nathan Gray. . . for. . . the love, good will, & affection I bear my beloved son Nathan Gray, Jr., do give to him a certain piece of land . . . on which he has lately erected a new house. . ." The date of the deed was February 24, 1764. For reasons unknown, Nathan sold his house one year later.



Gray Genealogy

ISAAC GRAY, died 1745 in Redding. The maiden name of his wife, Rebekah, and the date of his marriage is unknown.

Children:

- i. Daniel, [perhaps the eldest child. Father conveyed to his "loving and dutiful son," all his Redding homestead in 1742, including the cattle, sheep, and swine, reserving only the south bedroom and part of the cellar as a life estate for himself and his wife, Rebekah.]
- ii. Sarah, bpt. 27 Nov. 1709.
- + iii. Nathan, bpt. 13 Apr. 1712.
- iv. Deborah, bpt. 13 July 1714, mar. Redding, 28 Dec. 1743, Matthew Rowley.
- v. Rebecca, bpt. 13 July 1714.
- vi. Mary, mar. 7 June 1743, Joshua Disbrow.

NATHAN GRAY, baptized 13 April 1712, died 1794. He married 24 July 1735, Mary Hurlbutt, daughter of Gideon. In 1738, his father conveyed to him his interest and that of his wife in a house and 20 acres in Weston in Applegate's Long Lot "near Rattlesnake Rocks."

(Wilton, between the West Branch and the Weston/Wilton town line. This house is no longer standing, but it was in the sharp curves on the south side of what is now Broad Street. This was over 200 years before the gravel pit formed Held's Pond, or Crystal Lake as it is currently known.)

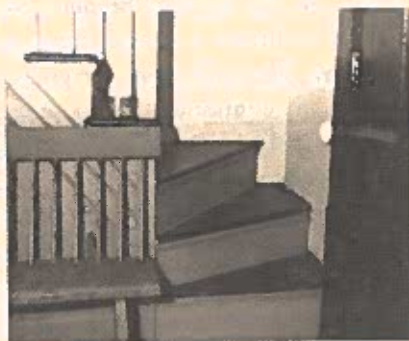
Children:

- + i. Nathan, Jr., b. 29 Sept. 1737.
- ii. Isaac, b. 7 May 1739.
- iii. Solomon, b. 21 Apr. 1740.
- iv. Thomas, b. 7 Dec. 1742.
- v. Daniel, b. 29 Oct 1744; mar. in Stamford, Prudence Waterbury.
- vi. Mary, b. 11 Mar. 1745/6; mar. Jonathan Squire.
- vii. Elijah, b. 16 Nov. 1747; d. 16 Nov. 1827; marr. 1st Esther ____, d. 10 Oct. 1791; marr. 2d Lydia ____, d. 22 Aug. 1826.

- viii. John, b. 3 July 1749; d. 10 Feb. 1817; marr. Eunice ____, 21 Apr. 1838, age 84. Civil War.
- ix. Gideon, b. 7 Mar. 1751.
- x. Eliphalet, b. 4 May 1753.
- xi. Joseph, b. 9 Nov. 1754.
- xii. Eunice, b. 19 Jan. 1756; mar. Robert Harris.
- xiii. Benjamin, bpt. 30 Dec. 1759.

NATHAN GRAY, JR., born 29 September 1737; died before 17 June 1787. The name of his first wife is unknown. He married 2d, 4 May 1780, Eunice Bulkley. Children by 1st marriage:

- + i. James, b. 1765. Executor of father's will.
 - ii. Martha. Mentioned in father's will.
- Children by 2d marriage bpt. Norfield Church.
- i. Mary, 5 Aug. 1781.
 - ii. Prissa, 25 Apr. 1783.
 - iii. Nathan, 14 May 1787.



JAMES GRAY, born 13 Jan 1765, died. He married in Weston, 5 Nov 1789, Elizabeth Osborn, daughter of Hezekiah, a Revolutionary War patriot. She died 20 November 1825. Both buried at Norfield/Coley Cemetery, Weston.

Children listed in will of James Gray:

- i. Hannah, b. 5 July 1790; mar. ____ Dikeman. Resided in Monroe.
- ii. Lewis Benedict, b. 7 Sept 1793, d. 28 Oct. 1824.
- iii. Clarissa, b. 11 June 1795; d. 1 Jan. 1835; mar. Charles L. Bennett abt. 1827.
- iv. Molly, mar. John S. Andrews.
- v. David O. [?Osborn?]. Resided Monroe.
- vi. Charles P. Resided Norwalk.

Sherwood Genealogy

RUEL SHERWOOD, born 3 November 1774, died 3 October 1842. He married Rachel Beers, who was born 12 October 1778 and died 12 March 1859. Children:

- + i. Charles E., b. 29 Mar. 1807.
- + ii. William Curtis, b. 26 Oct. 1818.
- iii. daughter, d. 13 Apr. 1834.
- iv. Eliza, d. 1880; mar. Edwin Weed of Darien.
- v. Harriet D., mar. Walter Bradley of Redding.

CHARLES E. SHERWOOD, born 29 March 1807, died 18 March 1897. He married Anna Bean who was born 29 September 1810 and died 28 February 1870. They lived at 2 Lyons Plains Road. Children:

- i. Henry M., b. 19 Dec 1831; d. 5 July 1902; marr. Liza Gray, dau. John. Child: Grace, marr. Charles W. Trumbull.
- ii. Charles W., b. 1834; d. 1892; marr. Lois A. Osborn, b. 1833; d. 1922. Civil War. Children: Annie, d. 14 Sept. 1859 aged 2 mos., 9 days; Clarence, d. 22 Mar. 1864, aged 3 yrs. 4 days; Florence, b. 1870, d. 1871.
- iii. James S., b. 28 Apr. 1838; d. 16 May 1908; marr. Melissa Hull, b. 27 May 1841; d. 1 Nov. 1897. Civil War.
- iv. John B., bpt. 5 Apr. 1854.
- v. Roston, b. 11 Feb. 1850; d. 16 Jan. 1866.
- vi. George, d. 22 Feb. 1856 aged 3 yrs., 11 mos., 12 days.
- vii. Mary Elizabeth, bpt. 5 Apr. 1854.

WILLIAM CURTIS SHERWOOD, born 26

October 1818, died 23 July 1897. He married Esther Merwin who was born 22 December 1830, and died 25 December 1915. Children:

- i. William J., mar. Jennie ____.
- ii. George.
- iii. Ryley J. [fem.], d. 14 Nov. 1865, age 14 yrs., 4 mos., 12 days.
- iv. Henrietta, d. 31 Oct. 1861, aged 4 yrs., 18 days.

Hill's Celebrity Research

Former Historical Society chairman Scott Hill presented the society with research that sheds light on Weston's famous people.

In a letter to the society, Mr. Hill said he became interested in tracking celebrities during the years he spent as an active member of the society. "I began jotting down names as I heard about them, or met them, or found them in our neighborhood," he wrote.

In response to *The Chronicle's* new arts coverage, Mr. Hill said he was moved to forward a copy of his list to the society. The list contains the names of people prominent in business and philanthropy as well as the arts. Among the artists, who resided here are: James R. Thurber, Wood Cowan, John Stuart Currie and the Frasers (see article this issue). Dramatists include: Sarah Churchill, Jane Powell, Alan Arkin and Eva LaGallienne.

The society welcomes gifts of a historical nature, including research that may serve as a resource to others. Currently, the society is assisting a Weston High School student with research on the town seal.

Spring Returns to Weston In the late 1800s, Weston's landscape looked remarkably different from its appearance today. The scene above, taken at the bridge over the Saugatuck River on Georgetown Road near Cobbs Mill, illustrates the difference between past and present. Looking north, behind the unidentified women in the picture, is a house that still stands today at 412 Georgetown Road. The house is located at the intersection of Newtown Turnpike.

Annabelle Remembers . . .

1924, The Spring



Spring has returned to the frozen countryside and everywhere there are signs of new beginnings. During the recent Easter holiday, families and friends gathered for extended visits. The Westporter Herald, our local newspaper, even carried an editorial encouraging readers to attend Easter services.

The Rev. Kenneth Mackenzie of Trinity Church in Westport officiated at the Easter service at Lyons Plains Church.

The little son of Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Strang was christened Richard Parker Strang at the Easter service at Emmanuel Church.

Among those visiting during the holidays was Edward Breitmeister of Brooklyn, who spent Easter vacation with his mother Mrs. Lillie Breitmeister. By the way, Lillie is having a bathroom added to her house. Clifford Patchen and son are doing the carpentry work.

In other Weston doings, there was a very pretty wedding at the home of Mrs. Emma Wakeman at the Forge. Scores of family and friends were invited to the wedding of Miss Ruth A. Wakeman and William E. Rowland last Wednesday evening at 8 o'clock. The house was beautifully decorated with white tulips and laurel. The bride looked lovely in a dress of white satin with veil and carried a large bouquet of white roses. Bridesmaids were cousins of the bride. Clarence Smith was best man. There was a fine display of presents, silver and china being very conspicuous. Almost 70 relatives and friends attended. Attending from town were: Mr. and Mrs. James A. Smith, Clarence Smith, Mr. and Mrs. George Sherwood, Mr. and Mrs. Eli Wakeman, Mr. and Mrs. George Eichinger, Miss Mabel Patchen, Irving Patchen, and Mrs. Malvina Wheeler.

A sign of pleasant weather and times ahead. . . Toltec Camp opened this week for the coming summer season. Summer residents are beginning to arrive. Mr. and Mrs. Stewart Benn arrived in town for the summer.

Frank Harcor is recovering from an attack of blood poisoning.

John Sturges of Georgetown has been visiting his cousin, Edward Budd, this week.

The rectory at Lyons Plains is now lighted by electricity. Lights were installed this week.

State Police are scouting Westport's Post Road to locate a police barracks. The town is being considered because of its location between Bridgeport and Stamford, where there is now a high concentration of through traffic. "The Flying Squadron," as state police are known, will be on the Post Road within a short time. Motorists, who are now hustling through Westport as though they had but a few moments to live, will be brought to a halt.

Weston friends were sorry to hear that Robert Frost of New York City had his feet seriously injured in an automobile accident recently.

A number of Weston farmers attended the auction on Tuesday at the home of the late John Wheeler in Easton.

Dr. W. E. Young and friend of New York City spent Sunday at the doctor's country home in Lyons Plains. Mr. and Mrs. Simon Bradley of Fairfield spent the day Sunday at the Wakeman home,

Annabelle Pierreux



Fraser Panels: Art Restores the Past

By Kathleen Saluk Failla

Three beautiful plaster panels depicting the people, events and symbols of American history will hang in the Town Hall meeting room this fall, where they will be lovingly restored by Weston sculptor Stanley Bleifeld. The works are by one of our nation's foremost sculptors, Laura Gardin Fraser, who died in 1966 in Westport.

The story behind the panels began 78 years ago, according to Harkness Cram, chairman of the Weston Cultural Events Committee. The committee played a major role in securing the panels as a gift to the town last March.

In 1916, Laura Gardin Fraser and her new husband, James Earle Fraser, moved to the Coleytown section of Westport, promptly acquiring land in Westport and Weston. Mrs. Fraser met her husband at the Arts Students League in New York, when she became his student in 1910. They married in 1913, when she was 24.

Their Westport home was more than a century old. "They built their nearby studio of fieldstone and it was there that they worked together for the rest of their lives. Because of their ever increasing renown, they were regularly visited by artists and leaders from every walk of life," said Mr. Cram.

In 1951, Mrs. Fraser's work came to the attention of an aide of General William Westmoreland, then superintendent of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.

She was commissioned to produce three massive bronze panels depicting scenes and symbols of American history. Since 1964, they have been on prominent display in the library at West Point. "The work became Mrs. Fraser's last of many monumental sculptures," Mr. Cram added.



After her death, John Rochovansky, life-long assistant to the Frasers, who still lives with his wife in the former Fraser home, where the Weston/Westport town line cuts across the property, offered the original historical panels in plaster to the Weston public schools. Each panel weighs 1,000 pounds and measures 11 feet by 5 feet. "The gift was not accepted then, largely because school development was underway and they (the panels) could not be accommodated," said Mr. Cram.

After some years in storage, the panels were taken in by the Westport Historical Society. In recent years, they were kept in the basement of the Adams Academy, a Westport Historical Society property.

Finally, 27 years after the gift was first offered to Weston, the panels were brought to town in March, largely through the efforts of the Cultural Events Committee, the First Selectmen of Weston and Westport and the Westport Historical Society.

The story doesn't end there.

Stanley Bleifeld, a Weston resident and renown sculptor, who is president of the National Sculptors Society, made his own very special contribution to the town. With the assistance of two students, he is restoring the panels without fee.

Work has been completed on the rear of the panels. It required, among other things, reinforcing plaster that had chipped off the steel bars providing the structural support for the art work. The second half of the restoration job will be done this fall. It is the front of the panels, the view most apparent to the public. Mr. Bleifeld put off the work until September, until his return from Italy, where he will spend the summer working.

When he arrives back at Town Hall in September, he will find the panels



mounted on the meeting room's rear walls, according to the current schedule. With the panels so installed, it will be easier to work on the hundreds of small scenes and symbols set in the panels. Work was previously done in the basement at Town Hall. Now that restorers will be at it in public, residents and students will have an unusual opportunity to observe a master sculptor at work.

In preparation for the panels' installation, the town engineer is developing plans to reinforce the floors beneath the rear wall to accommodate the weight load imposed by the massive art works, Mr. Cram said.

Later this year, when the restoration is finished, the Cultural Events Committee plans to host an open house at Town Hall to show off the Fraser panels to the public and thank Mr. Bleifeld.

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