

The Chronicle Quarterly

Weston Historical Society

Summer 2005

Volume 26, No 2

THE LEATHER MAN REVISITED



Over the past several years we have written and updated you about a gentleman know as the Leather Man. It was thought that his name was Jules Bourglay and that he came here from France after a terrible mishap and a broken heart, spending the rest of his life wandering around Connecticut and New York all dressed in leather. In May of this year we received from Mr. Dan W. DeLuca of Meriden, Connecticut his findings on the Leather Man. Mr. DeLuca has studied him for many years, and we would like to share Mr. Deluca's findings with you.

Before we do this however, there are two other places in which we have found information about the Leather Man. First is an article found in the Connecticut Shore Magazine, summer 2004 issue (given to us by Jane Atkinson), saying "He rarely spoke. On and on he trudged, carrying all his worldly possessions in a large leather sack slung over his shoulders. He was short and stout, with an unruly mop of black hair, dark piercing eyes and dusty face. The clothes crudely stitched together with leather thongs. At first sight this man might have frightened those who chanced to cross his path, but instead Branford residents yearned to catch a glimpse of a world-weary traveler known simple as "The Leather man."

The second finding was a newspaper article found on the back of a picture recently received from Norfield Church. When the archives department was removing the picture to see if there were any names listed on the back, they discovered the article.

continued page 2

LEATHERMAN

continued



One of the snippets stated that "The Lather Man, about whom there is so much mystery, appeared in Ball's Pond district on Friday. (This is the Danbury area). He was given dinner at John Hoyt's. Mr. Hoyt has been much interested in him for about twenty years, and has kept a diary of his appearing, which is at uniform intervals. This time he was four days behind time. A long acquaintance with this eccentric individual does not make him inclined to communicate anything concerning himself. He was given a copy of the The News that contained an account of a messenger seeing the person whom he is supposed to be, that had come to this country to find him and give him the portion left him by his deceased father.

Mr. DeLuca has given us more definite facts such as "he was most likely born in Canada around 1839. The year was determined by the coroner's inquest that his age at death to be 50 years old. He was reported to be in Connecticut and New York about 1858. He would have been about 19 years old at that time. He was about 5 feet 7 inches tall, about 140 lbs. He had a high, commanding forehead, black hair with a short black beard, and dark blue gray eyes."

"He lived in caves, huts, rock, and lean-to type shelters. Water was always near by. Where there is

one shelter, there is another one near. He was gathering and preserving mean, apples, nuts, and berries, etc. He had a number of gardens in different locations and was at home tanning leather. He had a strong knowledge of Indian lore and was using it to survive."

"He was known as 'The Leather Man' in newspapers by 1869 or before. His clothing was made of soft-tanned calfskin leather, stitched together with thongs. He wore a long coat, with pockets inside and out. His boots had thick wood soles with leather tops. A cap with a leather visor completed his costume all of his own make. He carried a large leather pack on his back and a walking stick in his hand."

"He was constantly traveling the country roads and railroad tracks, and would gather tobacco at railroad stations and hotels along his way. He traveled all around Connecticut and New York State from 1858 to about 1882 and it is reported he made annual trips to Canada. About 1883 he started traveling his famous clockwise circuit of 365 miles in 34 days between the Connecticut and Hudson Rivers until he died. (March 20, 1889 Vital Records Mount Pleasant, N.Y.)."

"He never was found to have stolen anything and never begged, molested or hurt any one. He would at times take what was freely offered him. He was not exempt from any 'Tramp Law's.' He would pose for photos, and there are at least 16 or more different photos of him. James Rodgers took the first photos he posed for in 1885 at the Bradley Chidsey house in Branford, CT."

"He was found dead March 24, 1889, in his shelter on the George Dell Farm in Mt. Pleasant, N.Y. A coroner's inquest was held and that is what was established: Certified Transcript of Death: Name: 'Known by the Leather Man' Sex: Male. Date of Death: March 20, 1889. Ag: 50. Manner of Death:

He died from blood poisoning, resulting from cancer. Place of Burial: Sparta Cemetery. Place of Death: Mt. Pleasant, N.Y. Place of Birth: Unknown. Father, Mother: Unknown."

"His remains were removed to White and Dorsey's undertaking rooms where many curious visitors viewed them. Nearby was the leather suit, which gave him his name. He was buried in the Potter's field at Sparta Cemetery, Sing Sing, N.Y. A pipe sticking out of the ground marked the location for 64 years. Then in 1953 a stone marker was placed on the grave."

"At that time it was thought his name was Jules Bourglay, but no one was able to verify this information. In 2004 new information has come forward and it has been verified. He was not Jules Bourglay. This was a name in a story that was published in 1884. Later it was proven false and was retracted by the newspaper. **He has never been identified.**"

We thank Mr. DeLuca for sharing all this information with us. It is certainly the most comprehensive study that we have come across. It clears up some information, but leads us down other paths. The fantasy and the reality of this individual have certainly captured our hearts and our imaginations.



Photo by James Fances Rodgers from the DeLuca collection



SCHOOL FOR HISTORY BUFFS

By Mary Ann Barr

“On a hot July weekend we sat in comfortable chairs at long tables in the coolness of air conditioning, the amenities of our ‘schoolroom’ in a building just off the grounds of the Harriet Beecher Stowe House in Hartford. ‘School’ was a seminar conducted by the American Association of State and Local History (AASLH).”

Like all similar institutions, the Weston Historical Society has challenges. The AASLH, a national organization, is a prime resource for helpful information in addressing challenges, including its first rate seminars offered round the country every year.

Gale Beyea and I had the privilege of attending the AASLH seminar in July. It was an intense, stimulating and informative weekend. In three days of slide shows, lectures and workshops we learned aspects of strategic planning, collections management and practices, interpretation of historic house museums and preservation of historic interiors and landscapes. We further learned how to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of our own organization as well as ideas and techniques for dealing with these challenges. One important lesson was the value of interrelating with the public and

giving individual visitors something memorable to take away with them. Another lesson was the value of organizing and maintaining collections and archives and proper accessioning.

For instructors, the AASLH pulls from heavy weights in the field of history and historic institutions. George McDaniel and Max van Balgooy were our instructors in Hartford. George is the Director of Drayton Hall in Charleston, South Carolina and Max is a Director at the National Trust for Historic Preservations. Both brought a vast amount of knowledge and experience to their talks. They also had the ability (or talent) for making their lectures captivating. Even the last part of the third afternoon found us all listening attentively.

We had homework too. One article we read is a very comprehensive article by George McDaniel. It covers many of the aspects of running historic institutions, such as mission statements, ethics and values, interpretation, landscapes, and more. I found it to be a kind of primer, which seemed appropriate since we were in a kind of school....

It is hard to tell what was most fun or interesting; working with

others dealing with issues similar to ours, dining and conversing with fellow ‘students’ or touring the Harriet Beecher Stowe House. In the Harriet Beecher Stowe House we got to go up in the attic and poke in corners most visitors never see and ask all the questions you always wonder about when you visit such places as a tourist.

The AASLH is a very worthwhile and supportive association for organizations such as the Weston Historical Society. It provides information and resources – in interesting ways - that can be very helpful. I can certainly vouch for the value of its seminars. I’d go to another one in a minute.

(Ed. Note: Mary Ann wrote her comments over a year ago, but we wanted to share her thoughts on this interesting seminar in light of our ongoing efforts to have an archive facility. Mary Ann has spent many hours learning about archiving, collections management and the running of societies, information that she has put into practice for our society. We thank Mary Ann for her continued interest and help.)



From the Editor:

As many of you know, Prue Bliss has passed away. She was a trustee for the Society for several years and took on the grounds as her personal project. Prue was instrumental in getting the tick project installed at the Coley grounds for several years and was always seen on site checking on the trees, the gardens, watering flowers, and making sure all was well.

We will certainly miss her great energy and dedication. Our thoughts and prayers go out to Woody and her family.

The Chronicle Quarterly

9 Christopher Hill, Weston, CT 06883
(203) 762-9208

Copyright, 2005 by the Weston Historical Society

Karin Giannitti
Editor

Wendy Giannitti
Proofreader

Custom Printing & Graphics
Design/Production

Close your eyes and step back in time 245 years. You open a door to be greeted by warm fires, the smell of good food and the laughter and conversation of friends and neighbors. Now open your eyes and go through the same door again to be greeted by warm fires, the smell of good food and the laughter and conversation, this time, of children, dogs, birds and adults enjoying their home.

Such has been the life of what we fondly call the Banks Tavern, built 275 years ago on April 13, 1730. The original owner of the property was Thadeus Burr who owned one of the long lots. When Roger Ludlow came to America with a small band of Puritans in the year 1640, he settled the land which encompasses Weston, Easton, Fairfield and a small part of Redding. Mr. Ludlow doled out the land to his companions in what were called Long Lots which ran parallel to each other and were named for the owner. Mr. Burr owned the long lot which ran along what is now Lyons Plain Road.

According to Fairfield land records, Benjamin Banks purchased the property on December 20, 1733. Later his son Thomas took ownership and opened the Banks Tavern/Inn in 1780. The seaports from Massachusetts to the Carolinas had to accommodate the constant flow of new arrivals until they could find homesteads for themselves and their families. The Banks Tavern/Inn served just that purpose.

The laws of the year required that tavern keepers be orderly, honest and temperate. Because of the time the Banks Tavern was in existence, one can only assume that it was well thought of. It had a tavern sign, required by law, and conversation might revolve around local events or gossip or discussions of colonial and worldly events. Prices for alcoholic beverages were established by the courts and the rate schedule was posted, as required by law. It cost 3 cents for a glass of rum.

For 80 years the Banks Tavern thrived not only on weary travelers, but on the townspeople as well. After a cold afternoon of sleigh riding or other outdoor activities, folks would flock to the Tavern for hot rum and a warm fire. The rum drink was called Flip and consisted of grated ginger and nutmeg with a bit of dried lemon peel rubbed together. **FUN FACT:** To make a quart of Flip you would first put the ale on the fire to warm. Then you would break up three or four eggs with four ounces of moist sugar, a teaspoonful of grated nutmeg or ginger, and a quarter of good old rum or brandy. When the ale is near to boiling you must put it into one pitcher. Put the eggs, rum, etc. into another pitcher and pour from one to the other until the consistency of cream. Heat before serving.

In an interview in 1932 from the Bridgeport Post, Frank Lyon who was born in Weston and whose family gave this part of Weston its name, said "there was a lot of heavy drinking, but they didn't abuse it as they do now. A man drank and worked then, now they just drink". He went on to recall dancing days at the tavern. "Folks used to come from all over the countryside, afoot, on horseback, any way they could get

HAPPY 275TH BIRTH



Upstairs Hall - part of original Ball Room



Living Room - boards in this room are pine cut from the property



Items found on the property. These were dug up by Michael Feliciano.

DAY BANK'S TAVERN



Above:
Window in Living Room.
Frank Lyons is sitting
next to this window in the
picture on the mantle.



To the left:
Picture displayed on the
mantle of Frank Lyons
next to the same window
as above.



Fireplace in the original Kitchen. It is extremely deep and wide.
The wood in the Kitchen is cherry originally from the property.

here. The dance step was called "Setting to Partners" and is said to have been the very reverse of Back to Back." Quite a lively dance from all accounts.

Any travelers wanting to spend the night paid a small amount and slept off what was considered to be the Ball Room on the second floor of the Tavern. The sleeping quarters was one big room with mattresses on the floor. The first one in took the spot farthest from the door and so on until the space was filled up.

In 1871 Philip Gerhardt purchased the Tavern and returned it to a residence. The Tap Room of the old Tavern has remained intact over the many years and still contains the huge 10 foot fireplace with the oven in the back rather than the side. The upstairs Ball Room was broken up into smaller bedrooms for family members, but still holds many, many secrets of the past.

The Gerhardt family, Elizabeth and then Albert continued to own the home until 1954. Philip and Elizabeth Gerhardt's graves can be found among those at the Emmanuel Church Cemetery. With those graves are the stones of three children Phoebe, Minnie and Johnny who all died within 10 days of each other.

In 1954 the house was purchased by a Stephen Smith and the title changed hands every few years until 1968 when Frederick and Doris Rickerich purchased the home. They enjoyed the beauty of the home, the land and the river running behind the house. They had a small row boat tied up on the river appropriately named "Dorrie."

Almost 20 years later the home was purchased by Jose and Susan Feliciano. The Felicianos were living in California expecting their first child. They decided to move to the East Coast and started looking for a home. Looking over a copy of Yankee Homes Magazine, Susan saw the Banks Tavern for sale. She fell in love with the home in pictures and then in person. They too have kept the beauty of the home intact restoring some of it to its original glory. On a recent tour Susan showed me two boards upstairs in the old Ballroom. One was on the floor and one on the wall. They were exceptional because of their size – approximately 18 inches wide, while all the others ranged from 6 to 12 inches. Apparently these boards were almost "illegal." Back in the early days any tree of a certain size was considered the "King's property" and could not be used to make boards.

Although the house is 275 years old it has remained one of Weston's most endearing homes. Its property encompasses a toll booth, carriage house, a large barn once used as a trading post by Mr. Gerhardt, and a huge rock which was used to practice for the oxen contests at the Danbury Fair. An ox was hooked up to the immense rock and he would practice pulling it for short distances in preparation for the Oxen Pull held every year at the Fair.

The changes have been few over the years especially for the love and pride the owners have shown *continued on page 6*



Original Tap Room from Ban's Tavern
The wood in this room is Pear wood cu from the property

BANK'S TAVERN

continued

for the beautiful land and buildings. It was and is now a place full of warmth and love. The house is "alive" with children being home schooled, and music being recorded. It gives the home a feeling of work, learning, and fun giving it its incredible vitality. We cannot thank Susan enough for being so kind as to allow us to take photos and take time from her busy, busy schedule to talk with us. We can't wait to see the new paint job.



This small building was used as a tollbooth. Notice the horseshoe on the door. These are always placed in this position to hold the luck inside.



Fixing up the outside for a new coat of paint.



Trading Post building used by Albert Gehardt.



From the Editor:

In our last issue of the Chronicle, we told you the story of Charity Jennings and her attempt to receive the pension of her husband who had served in the Revolutionary War. In that article there was a listing of Charity's children with the letter D written next to them. We were afraid that the D meant that the children had all died and we asked for your help.

And what a great response we received! Thanks to Ernie Albin who was the first person to tell us that the D meant Ditto. This was followed by calls from Lynne Barrelle and George Guidera confirming that the D did indeed mean Ditto. We are so happy to tell you that Charity did not lose all those children.

We also received the following note from Ray Rauth who gives another take on Charity and her life:

"Karin, Saw your fine article about Charity Jennings in the latest Chronicle. You enclosed a record from Bradford Winton, Weston Town Clerk, with data for the ten Jennings children. In the article you interpreted the "D", as an abbreviation for "Died."

"I'm not sure that is correct. Several years ago one of my clients was an Indian engineering firm. When they made lists they used "Do" as the abbreviation for "Ditto," for which we would normally use " ". Since it would seem unusual that the clerk would write, for example "Elijah Died Died August..." I think that he may have been abbreviating "Ditto" for both "Jennings" and "Born."

"I note that Charity and Abraham were married 7/2/1772 and their first child was born 11/13/72. I'll bet that set tongues a-wagging in Weston!"

Thanks Ray...we just bet it did.



RURAL PICTURES

*A bit of summer day beside a brook
With line low dipping from a shady nook;
With hum of bee and song or bird to cheer,
And God's own heaven lying sweetly near.*

*On bright September day with golden-rod
And purple asters decking all the sod,
A stroll thro' leafy wood, 'neath sky of blue
With glints of sunshine smiling sweetly thro'.*

*A mossy pillow for my tired head,
And soft green carpet for my comfort spread;
A richer home than that of proudest kings-
With mother nature and her growing things!*

*A hunt for berries through the sparkling grass,
Brushing dew-jewels from flowers I pass;
The ripe red berries paying all my pains,
With you dear gentle friend to share my gains.*

*The dropping nuts on crisp October days,
Tempt me again in pleasant woodland ways;
And through the rustling leaves of colors rare,
I chase the squirrel and his plunder share.*

*An Indian summer, smiling thro' the mist,
Like babe in slumber, mother lip has kissed!
A hush o'er all things, and a holy calm
Like dying echoes of a vesper psalm.*

*A blazing fire on cheerful farm-house hearth,
And halls resounding with Thanksgiving mirth;
And ere the echoes die, at Christmas-tide,
Comes Santa Claus with waving banners wide.*

*A merry jingle through the frosty air
O'er snowy hills with mantle spotless fair;
Remove me far from city strife and noise,
And give me country cheer and rural joys.*

Mrs. N. K. Bradford



(Taken from a Good Housekeeping Magazine 10/3/85)



The Farmer's Puzzle,

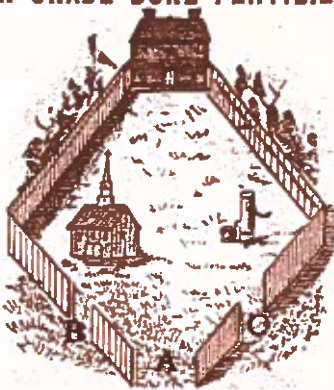
PRESENTED BY

WILLIAMS, CLARK & CO.,

MANUFACTURERS OF

HIGH GRADE BONE FERTILIZERS.

WILLIAMS, CLARK & CO'S
FERTILIZERS



ARE COMPOSED OF
BONES, BLOOD AND MEAT.

(COPYRIGHTED)
A farmer had a lane from his house to the gate A. How can he make a path from his barn to the gate C and from the well to the gate B without any of the paths crossing?

The solution of this Puzzle will be sent on application to our office.

101 PEARL STREET, NEW YORK.

The Weston Historical Society
Chronicle Quarterly

Karin Giannitti, Editor
9 Christopher Hill
Weston, CT 06883

NON-PROFIT ORG
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Westport, CT
Permit No. 212

