



WINTER 2016

A NEWSLETTER OF THE OLD TOWN HALL MUSEUM
624 SOUTH BRITAIN ROAD | SOUTHBURY, CONNECTICUT 06488

Old Town Hall Museum

Wednesdays 10—Noon
Other hours by appt:
(203) 405-3124

Museum Administrator:

Leigh Graham

Archivist:

Kimberly Neuenschwander

South Britain Library

Tuesdays 6—8 PM
(203) 232-9874

Librarian: Robin Stiles

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2015—2016

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Town Hall

with J. Eliza & George Mitchell, circa 1874

THE COLORFUL HISTORY OF SOUTHBURY'S FIRST TOWN HALL

BY KIMBERLY NEUENSCHWANDER

Previous to the late 1800's, town meetings in Southbury alternated between the Congregational Churches in Southbury and South Britain and Bullet Hill School. As early as 1867, the decision was made to build a permanent town hall. According to town records from September 7, 1867, plans were made to “appoint the Selectmen Agents to procure a title of the Brick School House, put the same in suitable repair and that a like sum, so expended be appropriated for a Building in South Britain for Town purposes.” South Britain seemed a logical

location because it served as the center of Southbury commerce at that time. Anson and Ellen Bray, South Britain's postmaster and his wife, sold Southbury the land that would become the future home of the town hall for \$125 on May 21, 1872.

With land now purchased, town officials created a committee to oversee the building of Southbury's first official town hall. Originally consisting of six members, the committee was reduced to three members by a town vote on September 29, 1873. This smaller committee consisted of David M. Mitchell, John Pierce, and Frederick H. Gray.

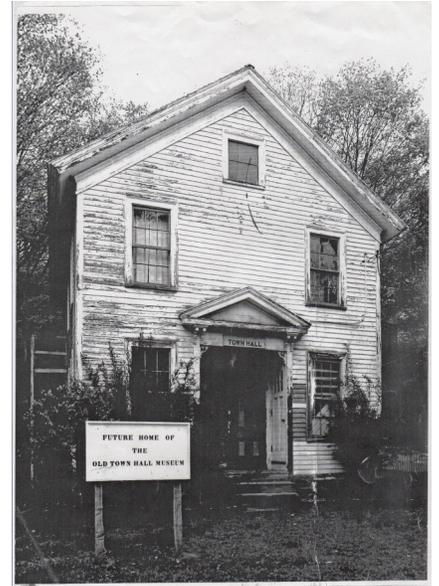
Initially, the new town hall was to be only one story. Various histories explain the addition of the second story. One such story credits the ladies of South Britain Congregational Church, with the intent of having a place for social gatherings and events, raising an additional \$1600 for the addition of a second story. Another story explains the addition was needed to house a secondary school. Regardless, town officials voted on May 23, 1874 for the addition of a second story, but the town would not be “liable for expenses in excess of \$1500 already appropriated.” A privy was later added for \$5.

The new Town Hall was completed in 1874 and the first official meeting held on October 5, 1874. Amazingly, the first floor housed and operated the police, justice

and small claims courts, board of education, tax assessor and collector, registrar of voters, the town clerk, and was the office and meeting location for the Selectmen. Town meetings were held in the evenings and the Selectmen met and paid bills on Saturday afternoons. Now home to the Southbury Historical Society's archives, the built-in vault held the town and court records. With a private entrance, the second floor was used as a community room and for church-related socials and events. It even housed a tuition based Select School in 1888 and public grades 8 - 10 in the early 1890's. The Town Hall in South Britain remained the center of Southbury's government and community events until December 31, 1963.

Upon its closing, many ideas were considered for the now empty building. A proposal by the Selectmen to rent or sell the property to the highest bidder was defeated by a town vote in 1965. Others proposed the creation of a senior center or turning it into offices for the probate judge, but these proposals were rejected by the Fire Marshall in January 1968 because of extensive renovations required to bring the building to code. By early 1971, the "Old Town Hall" stood neglected and derelict.

This concludes part one of a two-part series on the history of the Old Town Hall. Stay tuned for part two in the May 2016 newsletter.



Town Hall pre-renovations

In honor of Black History Month OUR FORGOTTEN POPULATION 1673-1940

BY MELINDA ELLIOTT

"If we don't talk about it, the next generation won't talk about it, and it will be forgotten in future generations." - Unknown

Amount of Taxes assessed,						
On Houses.			On Lands.		On Slaves.	
Dollars.	Cents.	Mills	Dollars.	Cents.	Dolls.	Cents.
"	"	"	1	77	"	"
"	"	"	"	46	"	"
"	28	"	"	44	"	"

The first Blacks arrived in the Woodbury-Southbury area with the very first settlers from Stratford, but not of their own volition; they were African slaves. In order to build a town in this early frontier, many people were required to scrape out an existence. The slaves were needed to cut down trees, assist in building houses, providing farm labor and household help. An early tax document (see left) shows that residents were taxed on "houses," "lands," and "slaves."

In Southbury, educating a slave was allowed, even encouraged. One adult slave, Jeffrey Brace, was sent to the local one-room schoolhouse to learn to read and write. The school master, intimidated by the slave's size, lashed out and struck Brace with his whip. Brace walked out of school and returned to his owner. Having compassion, she taught him to read and write.

At the beginning of the Revolutionary War, Blacks were not allowed to be part of the military, but by 1777, George Washington signed an order that not only allowed them to serve, but guaranteed them freedom for their service. Jeffrey Brace served side by side with his master's family. Another slave, Galloway Peters, was in two Connecticut regiments from 1777 to 1783. His record reports, "It was stated that in one part of his service, he acted as waiter for Colonel Huntington." Cyrus Homer, a slave of Colonel Edward Allen, came to Southbury to farm the land while his master fought in the war. "I was brought with my master to Southbritain about the

time the Tea at Boston was thrown into the Harbor.” Other known slaves that served in the war were: Timothy Caesar, Marshall Cam, Lafayette Cam, Crosby Freeman, James Polly, James Sharp, Joab Sharp, Cummy Simons, Robin Starr, and Jethro Tony.

The post war years brought a different type of life for freed Blacks in Southbury. Several of the former slaves owned land, had a livelihood, and received a pension from the government for their war service. They were allowed to be baptized and were absorbed into the church functions.

Connecticut law stated that a master could not release a slave unless they were capable of supporting themselves and would not become a burden on the community. In many cases, this meant that a slave was never truly released, and was listed on the census as a “domestic,” “servant,” or “laborer.” Vital records show that about forty Black families resided in Southbury the first half of the nineteenth century and some of their ancestors arrived with the earliest white settlers.

As the Civil War approached, Harriet Beecher Stowe, a relative of the Beecher’s who lived in Southbury, wrote Uncle Tom’s Cabin which brought a new awareness of the slave’s plight in the South. At the same time, it also brought a new fear and distrust of local Black families.

William Williams, a “free colored man,” went to the little church in Southford to hear the circuit preacher one Sunday in the spring of 1860. Upon entering the building, he was escorted to a seat in the middle of the church. A Deacon was angered by this placement and demanded that William be relegated to the old “Negro pew” at the rear of the church. William had to decide if it was more important to listen to the sermon or walk out. He stayed for the service and later wrote a lengthy letter to the Deacon who seated him in the offensive section.



George Jackson was a descendent of the Jackson family, an early Black family in Woodbury-Southbury. Jackson served in the 127th Regiment, U. S. Colored Regiment, which was at Appomattox when General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Grant. After the Civil War, a number of ex-slaves moved from Virginia to Southbury and were integrated into the community, working on farms or in local factories. They married local girls and started families.



Susan Jackson

In the early 1900’s, most of the factory jobs moved to Waterbury and Naugatuck, and farming opportunities diminished, leaving only a couple of Black families in Southbury. One of these families belonged to Susan Jackson, widow of George Jackson. Born into slavery in Virginia, she became a landowner upon her husband’s death. She was a noted midwife who worked alongside Dr. Greene, the town doctor. After Susan passed away in 1935, her children and grandchildren left Southbury, leaving no Black families in town.

Sadly, the names of many of the slaves and free colored families are lost through time and a lack of written histories. A quick look at the local cemeteries reveal there are very few headstones marking the Black residents. In front of the White Oak Cemetery a sign reads, “The story is told that slaves are reported to have been buried in the driveway.” Historian Kari Winters wrote, “In Southbury, the presence of slaves, like the memory of Indians and indentured servants, is almost invisible.” As a community, we should acknowledge the lives and contributions of *Our Forgotten Population*.

THE SOUTHBURY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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A Newsletter of the Old Town Hall Museum

KEEP IN MIND

- ◆ ***Through mid-May, Southbury Public Library:*** An exhibit on the history of the Old Town Hall in the Brinker Fireplace Room
- ◆ ***March 15, Bullet Hill School Docent Workshop:*** Bullet Hill School will conduct a free docent workshop starting at 9:30 AM. The program includes basic docent training and guidebooks, a tour of the facility, and refreshments. Snow date is March 17, 2016 at 9:30 AM. Contact Maura Stanko at (203) 264-5290 or Melinda Elliott at (203) 264-2095 for more information.
- ◆ ***April 30, SHS Annual Meeting:*** location and details TBA
- ◆ ***May 12, History Bites:*** A presentation titled, "Behind These Brick Walls: Stories of an 18th Century Schoolhouse," will be given at Bullet Hill School. The one-hour program begins at 12 PM. Bring lunch. Drinks and dessert provided.



Bullet Hill School, 1909