



the Southbury Historical Society

SPRING 2017

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

Old Town Hall Museum

Wednesdays 10—2 PM

Other hours by appt:

(203) 405-3124

Museum Administrator:

Leigh Graham

Archivist:

Kimberly Neuenschwander

South Britain Library

Tuesdays 5—7 PM

(203) 232-9874

Librarian: Robin Stiles

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2016—2017

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Exterior of Bullet Hill School, circa late 1930's

**HONORING SOUTHBURY'S OLDEST
PUBLIC BUILDING**

BY MELINDA ELLIOTT

Southbury's Bullet Hill School has stood silently on the original location for well over 200 years as scholars enjoyed the benefits of learning. Generations of students including numerous members of the Hines, Hicocks, Osburns, and Hinmans received their education inside these brick walls. Many of the early students became leading citizens in towns; several to graduate from Yale and going on to become state representatives, or local officials.

The exact building date is unknown, and there are many opinions about the beginning of the school building. Some dates mentioned are as early as 1762, and many other dates as late as 1800. We know that there was a schoolhouse, possibly a wooden one-room school, in the Bullet Hill district as early as 1741. In an entry in David Hicok's journal of 1769, he says "...

Deacon Hicok Hired me to keep School at Bullet Hill – to begin School on the Monday after Next.” Within his journals, David mentions many aspects of the schoolhouse, but there is no specific reference that it was a Brick School.

According to oral family history, one of the Hine’s children is said to have fallen into the dug-out cellar of the school in 1789 and had to be rescued. This is the date the National Register of Historic Places has accepted as the official beginning of the school. So far, there has not been any source materials found to prove the exact construction date.

The main floor of the schoolhouse was used as a school room – sometimes as two school rooms. A large divider was installed that could be lowered from the ceiling to provide a barrier between two groups. The upstairs room was completed in 1803, financed by a group of local business men. Their goal was to create a meeting and recreational room. This room was used for everything from church meetings, lectures, political meetings, town meetings, to concerts and balls. When the student population increased, the upper room was needed for class space. After quick renovations, classes began upstairs in 1929.

Classes were held in the Brick school from its early beginnings in the 1700s through December 1941, when all the town’s one-room schoolhouses closed. The sign along the road at Bullet Hill School reads, “...one of the oldest school houses still in use. . .” In January of 1942, all of the Southbury students went to one central brand new-school, then called the Consolidated School, later called Gainfield School.

The Bullet Hill School continued to be used. The Superintendent of Schools moved in and the building was also used for the distribution of ration cards and war bond sales. A group of men were appointed as trustees of the schoolhouse, responsible for the upkeep. Through the years, many organizations used the space for their meetings, and the Church of the Epiphany held Sunday School classes there. Several ideas were circulated about turning the school into a library or a museum for war paraphernalia. Eventually, however, the facilities at the school were outdated to the modern



First Floor Interior of Bullet Hill School

world, who now expected running water and indoor plumbing. For a many years, the old Brick Schoolhouse sat empty and neglected.

In 1964, the town's selectmen made arrangements to lease Bullet Hill School to the Woodbury Historical Society for one dollar per year for 99 years. Local citizens found out and objected, saying that the school was a historic building for Southbury, not Woodbury. After a short legal battle, the contract with Woodbury was changed from "99 years" to "if Southbury forms a historic society, the lease would be suspended." Woodbury pulled out of the negotiations and the Friends of Bullet Hill School was formed.

The Friends of Bullet Hill School, under the leadership of many dedicated people, planned and carried out the renovation and restoration of the Bullet Hill School. The building had a resurgence of activities, becoming the meeting place for scouts, clubs, and businesses. One report states that there were up to six meetings in the building on one day. In the discussions, it was decided that the building should also be used for educational purposes.



Catherine Palmer with school students from News-Time article, May 21, 1989.

Bullet Hill School Days-A Living Museum

Mrs. Catherine A. Palmer, a teacher at Gainfield School, championed the Bullet Hill School Days—A Living Museum program. As the Friends of Bullet Hill School finished the extensive repairs and restoration to the building, Mrs. Palmer asked if she could bring her students to visit the Brick Schoolhouse. The idea became a plan and Mrs. Palmer led hundreds of volunteers to set up the program.

The Heritage Village Wood- and Metal- Workers Club volunteered to make the replica desks for the school according to a pattern Mr. Paul Palmer sketched based on the desks in the schoolhouse of Old Sturbridge Village.

The Brinley family set up a fund to pay for supplies for the purchase of McGuffey readers, slate boards, and slate pencils. Hornbooks were made by the Louiseau family. Paul Palmer wrote the letters on each board which students then copied while learning how to use a quill pen. The teachers and parents of the elementary schools sewed costumes and bonnets for the girls and ordered hats and suspenders for the boys to wear during their Bullet Hill School Days experience.

Bullet Hill School Days-A Living Museum welcomed their 30th year of scholars in 2017. Each student visiting the school this year received a commemorative Bullet Hill School Days – A Living Museum pencil, a puzzle books, and new coloring pages to take home.

The program's success is partly due to the amazing docents that have served at the Bullet Hill School Days. Docents greet the children upon arrival to teach them about the brick building before taking them to see "old Necessary" or "Convenience House." Children are given an overview of the history of Bullet Hill School and are told what to expect during their step back in time.

**THE SOUTHBURY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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A Newsletter of the Old Town Hall Museum

SAVE THE DATE

Saturday, June 10: 30th Anniversary of Bullet Hill School Days - A Living Museum Program & OTHM Open House

On June 10, 2017, everyone is invited to a special Open House at the Brick School from 10am to 4pm. In addition to the normal festivities, join us for craft projects, Colonial games, and door prizes every half hour. Check out our new beautiful displays, including a temporary display of hornbooks. Special events include Making a Quill Pen at 11am, Visit with Catherine A. Palmer at 12 noon, and Ask our Town Historian with John Dwyer at 1pm. The board of Bullet Hill School have been working diligently to set up new displays of Southbury District Schools, and a BHS Class Photograph Display from 1900—1941.

The Southbury Historical Society will release their 2017 pewter ornament on that day, which is a special image of Bullet Hill School designed by Laurel Cassaza, and caste by Woodbury Pewter.

The open house coincides with CT Open House Day with many museums throughout the state. The SHS will host an open house at the Old Town Hall Museum from 12—3 PM and will also be selling the new 2017 ornament. Visitors to the museum will receive a complimentary Southbury Bicentennial Print, choice of two designs.

The SHS will also hold their Annual Meeting this day at the OTHM from 11—12 PM.

