

The Farmington Historical Society

Preserve to Educate. Educate to Preserve May 1998

A NEW HOME!

The Farmington Historical Society faces an exciting challenge: the opportunity to acquire permanent headquarters at 138 and 140 Main Street. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving will transfer title from the estate of James Thomson when the Society demonstrates its ability to finance necessary repairs and fund on-going maintenance. The FHS Board has unanimously and enthusiastically accepted this challenge, confident that the Farmington community will support the necessary capital campaign.

A vigorous growing organization, the FHS must move from its present home in the branch library basement. 138 Main Street will provide office space for clerical help and will be an accessible, visible, and appropriate location for Society activities. Here Society representatives can handle inquiries, field phone messages, hand out brochures, schedule tours. Monthly board meetings and other small group meetings can also take place at the site. TPZ approval restricts parking and occupancy and the Society's major public functions will continue to be held in other town meeting spaces.

Restoration and preservation are guiding principles in the Society's plans. The larger cottage first appeared in mortgage records in 1787. Attic beams are numbered suggesting its removal from an earlier site. The two cottages were sold in 1797 to Coral Case, a hatter. The smaller structure was used as a shop and perhaps explains the origin of Hatter's Lane. Colonial householders often operated shops on their premises but few have survived. (The tinsmith shop at 99 Main is another rare example.) The cottages were acquired by Winchell Smith in the early 20th century. Jim Thomson bought them in 1970 as a far-sighted act of preservation. According to architectural historian David Ransom, these buildings are "of great significance as studies in vernacular architecture." Many Connecticut towns glory in their grand colonial houses, as does Farmington. But few workers' cottages with adjoining shops remain. Serendipitously, local historian Ann Arcari, while participating in the Society's recent exploration of African American presence in Farmington, uncovered a link between that aspect of our history and these cottages. In the 1850 census Hannah Prince, identified as "black", lived there with several children. One of them, William, was listed as a barber. Perhaps the smaller cottage served as his shop.

The office will occupy one of the front rooms of 138. The other will be used for wall displays, computer and audio-visual learning materials. The north room (with the bay windows) will serve as a library and study area. The largest room, on the south side, will

be the Board and small group meeting room. Society paintings and furniture, long crowded and unappreciated in the cramped basement, will find at last a suitable setting.

The lovely gardens, lawns, pool and shrubbery, laid out by Winchell Smith (who also supplied the iron fencing), have been in a sad state of decay for years. With the help of community organizations we hope to put this right. Planting, lighting, and parking will comply with the wishes of neighbors and the directives of the TPZ.

What are the costs? How much must we raise? Builder Skip Pogson, who recently did extensive work on the buildings, reports that they are now in sound condition. But outdoor work, restorations, painting, and on-going maintenance will mean the Society must assume unprecedented costs. Renovation costs are estimated at between \$75,000 and \$100,000, part of which may be contributed in kind. The Society will continue to rent 140 Main as a dwelling -and that income will contribute significantly to maintenance- but prudence suggests we must establish an endowment as well. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving will help us with initial costs if the Society and the community demonstrate their commitment and support as well. The FHS Board is confident that all of us will work together to meet this challenge. Such an opportunity will not come again.

ANNUAL MEETING: WEDNESDAY, JUNE 17, 5:30 PM

Librarian Richard Williams will be the featured speaker at the Society's annual meeting to be held at the Lewis Walpole Library, 154 Main Street. His presentation, "Horace Walpole and Emerging America," will follow a short business meeting. A reception on the grounds (or porch) will follow.

We should assemble at the entrance to the Day Lewis Indian Museum at the end of the driveway at 158 Main, the next driveway south of the Wilmarth Lewis house. There is some parking in that driveway. Other parking may best be found on Tunxis Street.

New officers and board members will be elected. Your presence will demonstrate your support for the important role the Society plays in this historic town. Guests and prospective members are welcome.

FHS HONORED BY ROGERS AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER; MENDE DESCENDANTS RETURN

At an elegant reception at the Lincoln Center of the University of Hartford on April 17, Peg Yung and Jean Johnson represented our society as it received an award for Farmington's contribution to African American history. Also honored for its role in supporting the *Amistad* captives and the Underground Railroad was the First Church of Christ, Farmington, whose award was accepted by the Rev. James Blanning and Betty Kelly. A large crowd assembled for this First Annual Black History Makers award

ceremony organized by the Dr. John Rogers African American Cultural Center, Inc. Many illustrious guests were present to receive awards or to honor those who did. Of particular interest to those in Farmington who claim a special connection to the *Amistad* captives were the great great grandsons of Sengbe Pieh, brothers Michael, Samuel, Patrick, and Solomon Pieh.

On Sunday April 19 all four attended services at the First Church, an emotional reunion for those assembled. Sharing the pulpit with the Rev. James Blanning, Samuel Pieh, currently the Director of the Mid-South/Africa Link, brought to Farmington heartfelt thanks from the descendants of Sengbe. He expressed their gratitude for the care and concern the Mendi received here, for their education in Christianity, in farming and in literacy. Pieh also enlivened the services by leading the congregation in African hymns, a return gift. A reception after the service, a tour of the *Amistad* sites (led by Peg Yung) and a luncheon at the Barney House continued Farmington's tradition of hospitality. During the brothers' stay, we also learned something of the family's history. Sengbe returned to his village. Though his wife had been carried off into slavery, he found there his three year old son, the great grandfather of our visitors. Sengbe prospered as a farmer and - a sideline made possible by his training here - a teacher. His descendants became part of the educated elite of Sierra Leone and became (or remained?) Christian. But it is only this generation which has sought to learn more about Sengbe's adventure; to have been captured as a slave was an embarrassment at the time, not to be advertised. Samuel Pieh served as an advisor to Spielberg in the film *Amistad* and played the eldest of the captives (with a beard dyed white). All four brothers have been living in the United States, but Dr. Michael Pieh, a doctor of Public Health, recently returned to Sierra Leone.

On Saturday, May 23, another group from Sierra Leone is expected to visit. 28 members of the United Nations Sierra Leone delegation guided by Dr. and Mrs. Sylvester Rowe will also attend a commemorative service at the First Church and tour the *Amistad* sites.

Those who remember the visit last September of Mrs. Patricia Kabbah will mourn her recent death. She electrified a crowd of over a hundred at Riverside Cemetery as she offered African hymns as part of a ceremony at Foone's grave. The wife of the then-exiled president of Sierra Leone, she attained prominence in her own right as the first woman lawyer in that country. Though the situation in Sierra Leone is still unstable, President Kabbah has been returned to power and she was able to return home before her death.

FHS PLANS VISIT TO MASHANTUCKET PEQUOT MUSEUM

Archivist Paul Costa has offered a special tour of the new museum for members of our Society. This will take place in the fall at a time to be arranged. If interested, please leave your name at Society headquarters. 678 - 1645.

HELP WANTED

The Farmington Historical Society seeks part time clerical help at Society headquarters. Eight hours per week; time to be arranged by mutual agreement. Call 678 - 1645.

WATCHFUL EYES

Julius Gay, speaking at the 1904 annual meeting of the Village Library Company on early Farmington, noted that while there were several popular inns in the Village, these were "for the stranger, not the townsman. Anything like hotel or club life was frowned upon," he explained. Every resident was expected to be a member of some family, whether actually related or not. In 1692, the town "by vote gave to Joseph Scott a liberty to dwell alone, provided he do faithfully improve his time and behave himself peaceably toward his neighbors and their creatures and constantly attend the public worship of God, and that he do give an account how he spends his time unto the townsmen when it shall be demanded by them of him."

** Contributors to this newsletter include Ann Arcari, Ron Bernard, Carol Leonard, Peg Yung. Ann Reed, editor. **

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May 1998

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