



# Bley House News

Dorset Historical Society

Winter/Spring 2012

A Seasonal Newsletter

## What is the Dorset Historical Society ? Richard M. Ketchum

### OFFICERS

Richard H. Hittle, President  
Jean Kingston, Vice-  
President  
Art Gilbert, Treasurer  
Ruth Stewart, Secretary

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Carol Cone  
Kathie Wall Evans  
Suzanne Hittle  
George Long  
Kaye Manly  
John McInerney  
Heidi Stokes  
Terry Tyler  
Susanne Washburn

### DIRECTORS EMERITI

Hank Westphalen

### MUSEUM CURATOR

Jon Mathewson

### OFFICE MANAGER

Betsy Olson

### Museum Winter Hours

Nov. 1 to May 15

W-F 10 AM to 12 noon  
Sat. 10 AM to 2 PM  
& by appointment

802-867-0331

802-867-0412 FAX

info@dorsetvhistory.org  
www.dorsetvhistory.org

A historical society is sometimes called a repository, which makes it sound like a bank vault, where the contents are hidden from view, under lock and key.

While a historical society is indeed a storage site for the artifacts and other mementos of earlier times, ours is also a place where the memories of the past are alive and accessible, where people from this community and elsewhere can discover what Dorset was like from the time of the very first settlers to the observance of Memorial Day this year.

History, after all, is us – the tale of our entire national family with its wondrous variety of complexions and origins and political beliefs, and how they came together to produce a great nation. And the Dorset Historical Society speaks to us of the part this tiny village played in that much larger story.

As one who has spent many years delving into the endlessly fascinating American past, I am keenly aware of how vital the continuing existence of documents and artifacts is to understanding our history. My own books on the American Revolution have relied almost entirely on primary sources, on the letters, diaries, and journals of participants, and records of all sorts that have survived since the eighteenth century. And I must say it is a miracle that so many of these documents have survived, when you think of the way Americans are constantly on the move and how many attics have been cleaned out during the past two and a half centuries.

Most of the documents I have used came from historical societies, so when I speak of them it is with the profound gratitude of one who has relied on them again and again for invaluable information.

This is not to say that one need be a historian to enjoy and benefit from a historical society. Far from it. The joys of these institutions differ for each visitor, and simply to mention a few of the collections in the Dorset Historical Society is to suggest the treasures that may be seen there.

For instance, we have a 100-year-old collection of pressed ferns from this neighborhood, in near-perfect condition...letters from Presidents of the United States...an ancient sled...paintings by local artists...early Vermont coins minted in the Mettowee Valley...splendid examples of the famous Fenton pottery made in Dorset Hollow years ago...a fine collection of early stencils...photographs of the marble and iron industries in early Dorset...wooden water pipes used before metal piping...rare books, ledgers, and letters from residents. And that's only a beginning!

Samuel Johnson once said that "All history, so far as is supported by contemporary evidence, is romance." He was right, or course, and to see tangible evidence of our past is one of the rewarding opportunities that await visitors of all ages at the Dorset Historical Society.

*This piece was written some years ago when the late Richard Ketchum was living in Dorset and was active in the Dorset Historical Society.*



Two of Mat Petrisky's 100+ sled collection advertised DHS's Third Thursday luncheon lecture

## The Curator's Notebook

It started, as these things do, with a phone call. The Dorset Fire Department left a message informing the Dorset Historical Society that they are planning on tearing down the building that once housed the Dorset Historical Society. Would we please, they asked, retrieve anything of ours still over there?

So, I asked around and found the general consensus to be that anything we had over there had been removed about two decades ago. Then one day, Terry Tyler came in and said we should check, just in case, and we walked over to the building, flashlights in hand.

The building had been left unlocked. Inside was a mess of old signs and such from Dorset village events, some old Fire Department whatsits, and some even more unidentifiable mounds. Basically, a mess. And it was dark. Even so, I spied something interesting painted on the far wall. It was like a large brown sun had been stenciled there. I pointed it out to Terry, and he said he did not believe it was painted. So, I made my way carefully across the room and found Terry was right. It was a metal sawmill blade, about 3 feet in diameter, hanging from its center hole by a nail in the wall. I could easily see it had been, until recently, covered with several pieces of sheet metal and plywood. These last items were now leaning away from the wall, suspended by nothing discernible.



There are some things you just have to learn on the job. For instance, it is not a simple thing to wrestle a fifty-pound sharp blade from a wall while reaching over spilled sheet metal and plywood. Also learned: the best way to transport a sawmill blade through downtown Dorset is to put a rake handle through the center hole, and hope the handle doesn't break.

It didn't. The blade (which was marked as property of the Dorset Historical Society, in case you were wondering), was repatriated with the collection, and the mystery of how a large sawblade could go missing from the collections was finally solved.

Incidentally, the sawmill blade, (1976.408.00) was donated by Harold Bixler in 1976, and was reportedly used in Edgerton's sawmill.

### TERRY TYLER RECEIVES AWARD OF MERIT



The Individual Award of Merit is given annually by the League of Local Historical Societies. This year it was presented to Terry Tyler by Mark Hudson, Executive Director of the Vermont Historical Society. The ceremony took place on Nov. 4, 2011 at the State House and was given to acknowledge Terry's many contributions to the Historical Society and to the preservation of the history of the Town of Dorset. If Terry looks surprised, it's because Art Gilbert managed to get him to Montpelier without telling him why they were going.



**A** year-long John Lillie Retrospective is now on display in the Venetian Red Room on the second floor of the Bley House Museum. The exhibition includes paintings and Lillie-related ephemera from our collections, as well as paintings on loan from private collectors, the T.W. Wood Gallery in Montpelier, and the Bennington Museum.

John Lillie (1867–1942) lived his entire life in Dorset. After deciding he did not want to be a farm-hand, he became a mason, and later a contractor. Fascinated by the artists who boarded in the summer months, one day he decided to try his hand at painting. He applied house paints to a piece of wood with a shaving brush, and hung his art with the other recent works. To make a long story short, he was an immediate hit, and before long he was shown in prestigious museums and galleries across the United States.

Lillie later wrote: “From the first, I have painted these things in my own way, never taking a lesson in drawing or color mixing, not caring what the other fellow did or how he did it. Just giving facts in my own simple language as they were revealed to me not caring what people said as these were my stories and I must stick to facts at any cost.”



“Mettawee Valley” by John Lillie, donated by Ms. Jean Silliman 1999

## Dorset’s Civil War Exhibit Underway for Expo 2012

In keeping with this year’s Vermont Historical Society Civil War theme for Expo in this 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year of the Civil War, the Dorset Historical Society will present items of interest from its archives and collections which describe many aspects of Dorset’s participation in this great conflict. Of particular significance in our research to date are two diaries, many letters from soldiers to families in Dorset, documents of medical significance and war-time equipment such as clothing, medical bags, a cartridge case and a splint used after the battle of Gettysburg. Together these items build unique stories of groups of Dorset comrades meeting and separating during the war as well as soldiers’ relationships with their families and Dorset village.

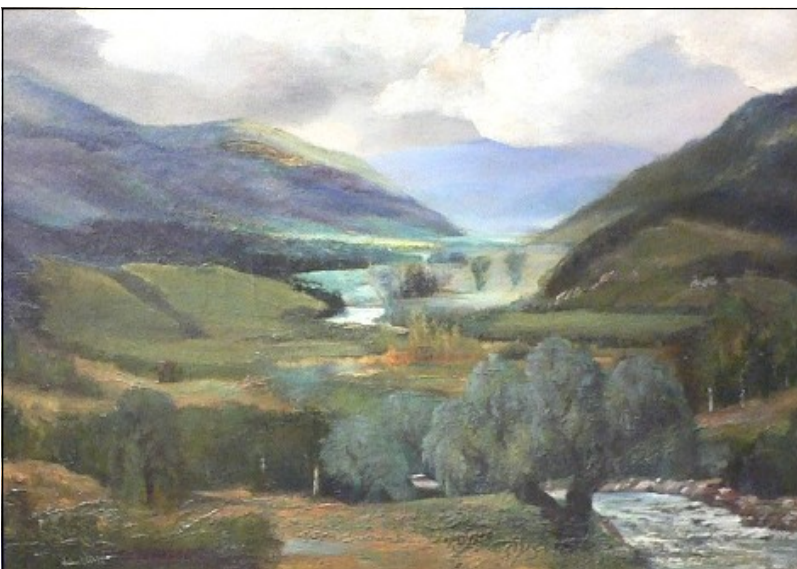
About seven percent of Dorset’s population participated as soldiers. Of the 140 volunteers and enlistees from Dorset, only four were officers. From first-hand testimonials, the theme of “*Dorset and the Civil War: In Our Soldiers’ Own Words*” will be displayed along with a map showing regimental travel from Brattleboro or Albany to Annapolis, Baltimore, Washington, Arlington Heights, Fairfax Station, Wolf Run Shoals, Gettysburg, Fredericksburg and battles and skirmishes in between and in four instances, imprisonment in Andersonville and Richmond. Of particu-

lar interest are soldier’s heartfelt expressions of longing for Dorset’s farms and forests in every season. The letters and diaries also describe the prevalence of illness, disease, lack of food and warm clothing and how soldiers improvise remedies for some of these hardships.

The Society is privileged to have Jim Gilbert of Dorset, a long-time member and former president of the DHS, as a special consultant on this project. Jim is contributing his expertise on Dorset’s participation in the war, garnered over 15 years of research, and he adds detailed perspective on the project with a command of the rules of war in this era of history.

We are also grateful for the many contributions from Dorset residents that we receive weekly. Photographs, documents, letters and diaries can be scanned and returned to donors. Artifacts can be utilized under a DHS loan agreement. DHS is accepting Civil War material through the end of May.

Save the dates of June 16 and 17 for the Vermont History Expo in Tunbridge, Vermont!



“Mettawee Valley” by John Lillie donated by Florence Shannon 1995

## LACUNAE

In the last newsletter, I put out a call for back issues of *Vermont Life* magazine to complete our two collections. The response was tremendous and successful. We now have a complete collection, and most of a complete duplicate collection. Also, several of the donations came with issues of the *Dorset Country Journal*, a magazine published in the 1990s. We now have a complete run of that magazine, as well. Thank you.

This time around, I am putting out a call for artifacts and information related to stereoviews of Dorset. Around 1879, H. S. Allen, a Manchester

# Our Holiday Exhibit

In December 2011 our holiday exhibit featured sports equipment from past winters in Dorset. Many of the items on display came from attics, basements and barns, but were items with too many memories to throw away. We had sleds, toboggans, bob sleds, jack-jumpers, skis, poles, snowshoes, clothing, boots, and even a poster advertising the never-built ski resort in Dorset Hollow.



photographer, released several series of Dorset stereoviews. The Dorset Historical Society has 19 of these, but there may have been more than 50, perhaps even 100. So, to fill out our collection and knowledge, we would like to have more of the stereoviews than we currently have, as well as any catalogs or listings of stereoviews Allen published, to understand better which and how many of these three-dimensional images we need to pursue.

Call curator Jon Mathewson, or bring in what you have.

### Save the Dates:

#### 3rd Thursdays at Noon Luncheon Series

(Brown Bag ~ Dessert provided)

**Mar. 15, 12:00 "Adventures in Dorset Genealogy"** with Linda French

**Apr. 19, 12:00 "Small Confederate Industry"** with Sloan McBurney

**May 17, 12:00 "History in the Forest"** with Alan Calfee

\*\*\*\*\*

**Wed., May 16 "Stone Walls"** with Robert Thorson

(Evening program with Manchester Historical Society--watch for details.)

### WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS

Seth and Christine Bongartz  
Ralph F. Colin, Jr.  
Richard Ketchum  
Linda McGinnis  
Jon and Kimberly Mathewson  
John and Marianne Metzler  
Stephen Oberon  
Arthur and Susan Ruegger  
David and Irene Wilson