



Bennington Historical Society News

An Invitation to Explore History Together

An attack on our nation's Capitol. A pandemic that has taken thousands of lives and changed how we interact with both friends and strangers. They dominate our news programs, and they dominate our thoughts. They also will be talked and written about by historians for many, many generations.

Like me, you may also have sometimes wondered how the people who lived through the Spanish Flu or the early growth of Bennington would look upon how we write of those today. Would their response be, "Yes, but . . ." or "I'll bet you didn't know that . . ." or "You know, I never knew what you've discovered about that event"?

In this newsletter, we write about bits and pieces of our local history, but we each have questions remaining--each wants to know more. Who used to live in my house? Why doesn't that church steeple look like it did when it was built? Who were those people buried in that cemetery in the woods? Why in the world did they . . . ?

Please join us. Share the historical tidbits you know about. Help us understand what it meant to be living through some event in the past. Give us clues to the history that none of us may know or comprehend. Or ask that question you're **wondering about**.

You're not just supporter of our historical society. You're a real part of helping us understand not just the past, but also what is happening now.

Send your questions, brief articles, or your responses to me and I'll try to incorporate them into a forthcoming newsletter. —RR

(raymond_rodrigues@msn.com).

Memories of A Mill Girl — with Anne Bugbee

—re-broadcast of a 2013 presentation

Bennington Museum is re-broadcasting various Bennington Historical Society Programs this winter. Don't miss "Memories of a Mill Girl" on **February 21 from 2 to 3 pm**. Anne Bugbee, Past President of the Bennington Historical Society, will lead a discussion at 2:45.

Check the Bennington Museum Calendar for registration information for this virtual event: <https://benningtonmuseum.org/event/bhs2021february/>



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Origins of the Catholic Church in Bennington

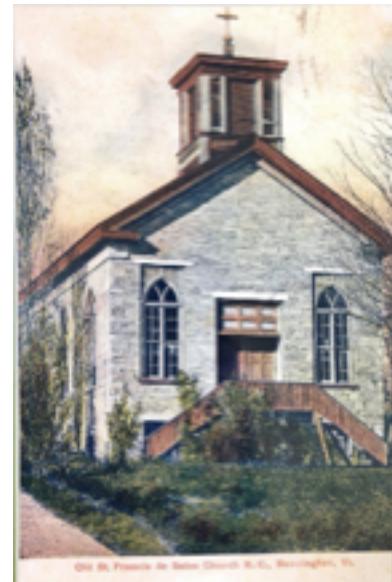
by Bob Tegart

A Catholic community was created in Bennington in the early 1830s when Father O'Callaghan from Burlington, Vermont, and Father Shanahan from Troy, New York, began visiting Catholics in Bennington to say Mass. Originally, both French and Irish families gathered in private homes. Later they attended Mass at various spots around Old Bennington, including the State Arms Building, where the Monument gift shop now stands, the Academy building on Monument Avenue, and the Courthouse, which was near the Old First Church. In 1854, the Bennington Mission was made a formal parish by Bishop Louis DeGoesbriand. Father Zephyrin Druon, who had been ordained in France, was appointed by the Bishop to lead the parish. Father Druon held meetings with the twenty-five local Catholic families, both French and Irish, to discuss the building of a church.

In March of 1851 Father Druon purchased land from Abigale Squire and her daughter Mary. Abigale was the widow of Truman Squire, secretary to the Governor, the Town Council, and the Town judge. They may have lived in the Ethan Allen House, next to the Old First Church. Soon funds were raised to begin construction of a church building, construction was started, and Bishop DeGoesbriand blessed the cornerstone on August 3, 1854.

St. Francis de Sales was the first Catholic church in southern Vermont. The Gothically designed church, built of local stone, was topped by a wooden belfry and cross and had a seating capacity of 400. It was said to be one of the most beautiful churches in the area. In 1857, land was purchased for a cemetery behind the church. In 1862 the church was expanded with the addition of a 25-foot vestry to the northwest side.

The church continued to serve the Catholic community until the congregation outgrew the old church and, in the late 1880s, discussion was underway to build a new, larger church. The church was vacant from around 1892 to 1923 when it was sold to the Historical Society. It opened to the public in 1928 as the Bennington Historical Museum. In 1954, the name was changed to The Bennington Museum. Today, the name is simply, Bennington Museum. (See <https://benningtonmuseum.org/about/the-museum-then-and-now/>)



Old St. Francis de Sales Church,
courtesy of Bennington Museum



Bennington Museum today. Note original Church structure and windows on the right.

A column on vernacular architecture in the Bennington, Vermont area, originally published in The Bennington Banner, from July 2013 to July 2013.

The Columns of Bennington

Yes, this is a column about the columns that builders in Bennington built before 1860. There are many; I will focus on the fluted ones.

Below is Bennington's Town Offices, built in 1842 for the Root family, given to Bennington in the 1920's to be the Town's offices.



The columns on the porch look like this on the outside: Doric, with flutes, no base and simple capitals, classic American Greek Revival.



On the inside they look like this:



Half of Plate XXIV, titled "Glueing up of Columns" in *The Architect, or Practical House Carpenter*, by Asher Benjamin, 1830.

Long wooden shafts, 2" thick minimum, with their sides cut at angles so that, when they are set side by side, they join in a circle. After three flutes are carved in each shaft, they are fastened together on the inside with angled blocks and hide the glue.

In 1842 this was new. As recently as 1836, when the Norton-Fenton House on Pleasant Street was built, the columns had been made from full trees, cut, shaped, and smoothed, with added capitals and bases.

The columns in the Old First Church, built in 1805, are also trees. Local tall, straight white pines, debarked and shaped, support the balcony, the ceiling of the meeting house, and the roof as part of the attic trusses.



Continued on p. 4

The next time you visit the church check the columns. You can see where tree branches were lopped off when the columns were shaped, and where the young men who sat in the balcony carved into those trees during church services.



Why did this change? Supply and technology.

The supply of tall straight trees close to the major seaport cities had dwindled. As early as 1820, the trees for the timber frames of houses along the seacoast north of Boston were being hauled by oxen and rafted down rivers from forests 50 miles away.

Remember that in 1840, a 3 mile journey to town in a wagon took 45 minutes. Bringing the lumber to the cities cost money and time. Those logs were too precious to use whole.

At the same time the technology of saw mills had greatly improved. Saws could cut not just one board from a tree, but

many boards at once. Those rough boards no longer needed to be planed by hand. A recently invented planing machine run by water power could do it. Bennington builders seem not to have had access to such a machine when the Norton-Fenton House was built. By 1840 they did.

Bennington had the trees. It wanted the newest style: Greek Revival. The pattern books written by master builders and architects had plates and descriptions, including how to build the new fluted columns.

Asher Benjamin in his book, *The Architect*, included detailed instructions to accompany his drawings. He wrote:

If the sides of the column be straight, two inch plank will be sufficiently thick for the staves. Make the joints in a fillet, or between two flutes. It will be seen that the plans show the exact width of each end of the staves, and also the bevel of their edges, and the curve of the outside. After the staves are got out by an accurate plan and with great exactness, as they must be, or your work will be bad, proceed to glue the edges of two of them. When the glue is dry, glue in blocks on the inside, as shown in the plans at *c c c, &c.* Let the blocks be from fifteen to twenty inches long. Fit them exactly to the staves, and place the grain of the wood the same way as that of the column, so that, if the wood shrinks or swells, the joints will not open or be affected thereby.

Excerpt from “Glueing up of Columns,” *The Architect*, Asher Benjamin, p. 52

I especially like his explanation of the necessity of accuracy and exactness in order to keep the work from being “bad.”

Doric Columns, some much larger than those on the Town Offices, were used on Pleasant Street and West Road and on Prospect Street in North Bennington. Those at Powers Market were brick, specially formed for that purpose.

A Brief History of Pandemics/Epidemics in Bennington

by Jamie Franklin, Curator, Bennington Museum
(originally published on Facebook.com/BenningtonMuseum, April 15, 2020)

I am a strong believer that historical perspective can be a powerful tool for progress and provide a sense of comfort in trying times. We can learn from our mistakes and successes and find solace in the fact that we've been through this before and not only survived, but continued to thrive. In this moment of pandemic, as our community is swept by the many fears that have accompanied COVID-19 and its attendant effects, I thought I'd take a look at the history of widespread health crises in our town's history to see what lessons we could learn.

Epidemics, or localized but widespread outbreaks of serious illness, are not new or even all that uncommon. The Museum's archives contain a number of letters and other documents that record various local outbreaks of disease, from dysentery and small pox to spotted fever and influenza, from the 18th and 19th centuries. A recurring motif of the more personal records, such as letters to family and friends, is the "fear" these epidemics caused. One of the reasons for this fear was the lack of understanding of how many of these diseases spread. Thankfully, we now have a much better, scientifically grounded understanding of how these sorts of diseases are transmitted and what we can do to protect ourselves and the rest of our community.

One of the most serious pandemics in recent history was the Spanish Influenza (also known at the time as grip or the gripe), which spread throughout the world between 1917 and 1919, infecting about 500 million people, a third of the total population, and killing about 50 million worldwide, with about 675,000 deaths occurring in the United States. Vermont was not spared, though Bennington was one of the least affected towns in the state. Hitting a peak locally between late September and mid-November 1918, on Dec. 19 the Bennington Evening Banner noted that the local Health Officer J. M. Ayres reported 599 cases and 30 deaths in the town of Bennington between September 21, when a quarantine went into effect, and November 21.

Reading through the reports published in the Bennington Banner during this peak, I was struck by how familiar they feel to our current situation. After the first reports of the arrival of the flu in Bennington in mid-September a quarantine was put into effect that lasted until early November. The low numbers of cases and deaths locally, relatively speaking, was attributed to the early and widespread adoption of quarantine in the town.

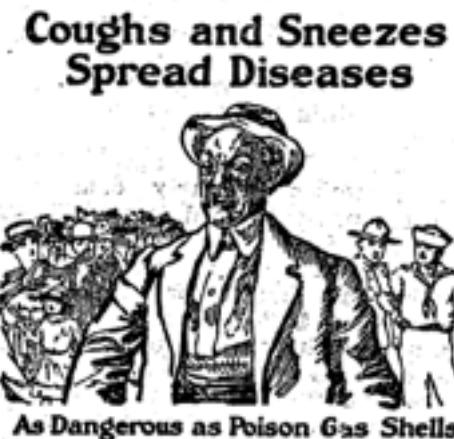
One of the things that sticks out to me from the reporting of the pandemic in the Banner are the lengthy educational articles, which provided solid fact-based advice about how to avoid the spread of the disease, such as those currently proliferating in the media in connection with COVID-19. It was from such an article in the Oct. 14 issue of the Banner that I pulled the wonderful graphic at the top of this post, with the catchy ditty "Coughs and Sneezes Spread Diseases."

At the height of America's involvement in World War I, the second line, "As dangerous as poison gas shells," must have really brought the seriousness of the situation home.

But of course, just like today, there was also lots of misinformation spreading. I was struck by the many large ads in the Banner during this period for dubious medicines, such as "Magic Pain Ease," a "Scotch remedy," that purported to be a cure for the Spanish flu and any number of other ailments. Disaster capitalism isn't new.

In closing, I'd like to make a shout out to our local health care providers and other essential workers, who are doing so much to keep our community safe and cared for. Thank you!

Note: A special thanks to Robert Tegart, Board Member, Bennington Historical Society, for providing me with access to his research into the Spanish Flu here in Bennington.



Get Ready for the 250th

by Phil Holland

You receive full credit if you know that “semiquincentennial” means “250th” without thinking too hard about it. Extra credit if you know that Congress created a United States Semiquincentennial Commission in 2016. Skip to the next problem if you already refer to it as “the Semiquin.” The Semiquin is coming to Vermont.

On December 15, Governor Scott issued an Executive Order creating the Vermont 250th Anniversary Commission with a mission “to plan, encourage, develop, coordinate, and promote observances and activities to be held in Vermont in commemoration of the historic events that preceded and are associated with the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution in the State of Vermont, in celebration of our present and in anticipation of the promising future of our State.” The Order singles out five events for commemoration: the 1775 taking of Ticonderoga “by the Green Mountain Boys under Ethan Allen,” the 1776 Battle of Valcour Island on Lake Champlain, the fortification of Mount Independence in Orwell, and the 1777 Battles of Hubbardton and Bennington.

The 1777 creation of the independent State of Vermont at Windsor and the conventions at Dorset and Winchester that led to it go unmentioned in the Executive Order; it’s all about Vermont’s role in helping bring about American independence, perhaps to make the Commission eligible for federal funding. Rep. Mary Morrissey of Bennington, who encouraged the Governor to make the Order, says that the 250th commemoration of Vermont’s Independence will get its due in some other form, in coordination with the Commission.

The Order establishes the membership of the Commission: “The Commission shall be comprised of not more than 14 members to include the Commissioner of the Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing; the State Historic Preservation Officer; the State Librarian; a representative of the Vermont

Historical Society to be selected by their Board of Directors; a representative from the University of Vermont appointed by the UVM President; and nine members shall be appointed by the Governor representative of the geographic and racial diversity of the State, to include a Revolutionary War historian; a member of a Revolutionary War reenactment group; a representative of the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs; and a representative of a Vermont history museum. The State Historic Preservation Officer shall serve as the Chair.” The first meeting of the Commission is to occur on or before March 1, 2021.

No Commission members have been announced yet, so how Bennington will be represented remains to be seen. Given the town’s connection to Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys as well as the presence of a State Historic Site (the Monument, of course) commemorating the Battle of Bennington, it is expected that one or two commissioners from the town will be named.



Vermont Centennial Arch at four corners in Bennington, Vermont, 1891. Courtesy of Bennington Museum.

The creation of a 250th initiative has been several years in the making, with Bennington people in the vanguard: Rep. Mary Morrissey in the House, Dick Sears in the Senate, and Jonah Spivak and a band of supporters from the town. Several bills have been given a hearing in House and Senate Government Operations Committees, one of which was on the verge of joint approval when Covid hit. The Governor stepped into the breach.

This much is certain (if anything is certain anymore): Bennington has hosted large and stirring commemorations of the Battle in the years 1877, 1891, 1927, and 1976, and should plan on a grand celebration in 2027. Expect to be involved!

Be a Part of the "Lively & Local" Exhibit

Vermont's story is shared, celebrated, and preserved by the over 190 local historical societies (LHS) and museums found in all corners of the state. The exhibit Lively & Local: Historical Societies in Vermont (April 6-July 31, 2021) will feature photographs, stories, and associated information on a wide variety of local historical societies and museums in Vermont. Your organization can participate in the exhibit by sharing your story via photograph(s) and text. Visit our website for details: <https://vermonthistory.org/lhs-gallery-lively-local> Submissions due February 5.

Bennington Historical Society A volunteer-operated program of Bennington Museum

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Thank you for your donation to Bennington Museum in support of Historical Society programs.