



# The Courier

60 YEARS OF PRESERVING MANCHESTER'S HISTORY

A quarterly publication of the Manchester Historical Society, Inc. • 175 Pine Street, Manchester, CT 06040 • 860-647-9983

## President's Message

*Dennis Gleeson*

Now we are well into our 60th year of the Society and all members past and present should be pleased with the progress made over the years, from the Cheney Homestead, the Old Manchester Museum, the Woodbridge Farmstead, the History Center, and the Cheney Silk vault building. Much progress has been made at all our properties since we acquired them.

And it continues. We recently had to replace the boiler at Cheney Homestead. We also painted the 18th century barn at the Woodbridge Farmstead, as well as the Visitor Center. Additional work is required at



the Silk Vault. Maintaining old buildings requires dedication and investment.

We have now hung a collection of VFW plaques in the History Center showing Past Presidents and Commanders of Post 2046, as well as Life Members, both men and the Ladies Auxiliary. A series of photos of members is also now on display.

Work has begun on the 250th Anniversary of our Independence, including a series of talks about the Declaration of Independence and events leading to it. Neighboring societies (Glastonbury, Bolton, and South Windsor) are collaborating in this venture through next year, as well as the State of Connecticut. The first presentation by Dr. Matt

Warshauer on the creation of the Declaration was held at the History Center a few weeks ago and was very well attended. Ken Burns' series airing on PBS about the Revolutionary War and events leading to it has been very enlightening and informative. It continues to be available online.

We wish to form several committees to help at the History Center with programs, tours and support everyday operations. Also, future displays and events are being suggested. Recording personal and family histories through interviews is another area where volunteers can help. And most importantly, fund raising is an ongoing necessity for an organization such as ours. Your ideas and suggestions are welcome.



*This History Center will be closed beginning Sunday December 21 and reopening Wednesday January 7.*



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*A newsletter of the*  
Manchester Historical Society

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Dave Smith

## We Will Miss .....

**Isabel Compasso** died recently at the age of 94. A long-time member of our Society, she was a teacher in Manchester and nearby towns and later at Manchester Community College. She became a partner with Anne Miller in real estate and was a mortgage officer. She volunteered at other organizations including church and the YMCA.

**Walter Scadden** another long-time member of the Society, was accomplished in many fields. While in the Marines he was a parachute rigger and later a firefighter in town. Among his many talents, Walt was a blacksmith and made a number of street signs in town as well as working at the Mystic Seaport Museum on old ships. He had a passion for driving race cars as well as writing, including the story of the great Cheney silk robbery during which security officer Bill Madden was killed (*Murder in Manchester*).

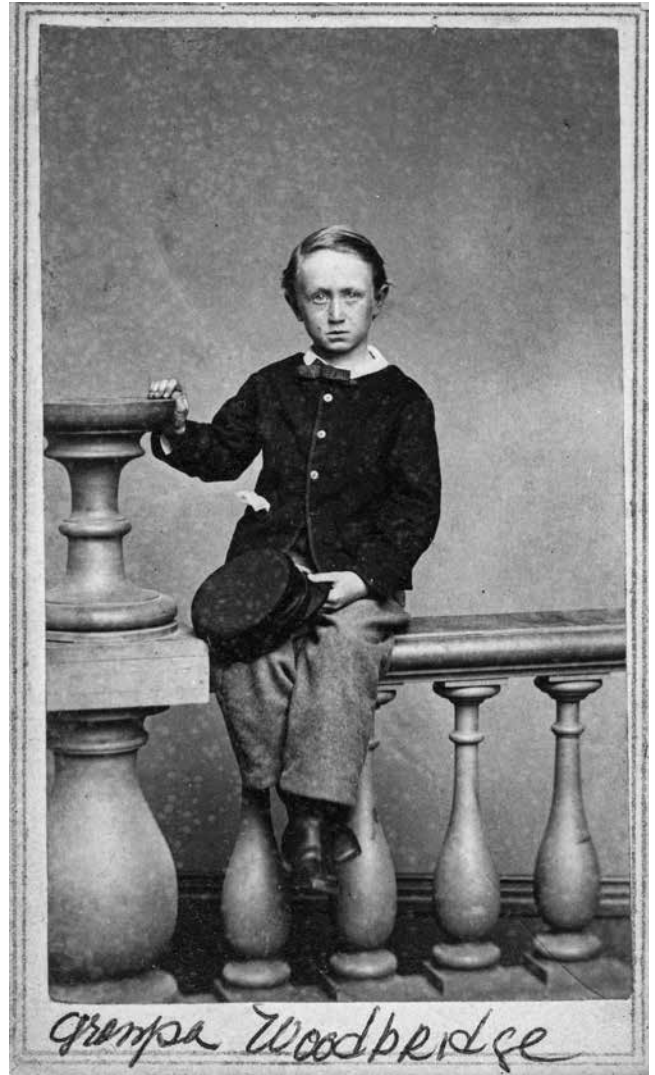


# Woodbridge Farmstead

*By Maude McGovern*

It's winter at the Woodbridge Farmstead. The last open house of the 2025 season is long over. But research into the history of the farm continues year-round. When the Historical Society accepted Raymond and Thelma Woodbridge's very generous donation of their house, barns, and land, it assumed responsibility to not only preserve the physical assets but to research, interpret, and tell the story of the Woodbridges. As part of that effort, I've been investigating and writing about the history of the Farmstead for the past two years.

People have asked me what my sources are. For example, do I use Ancestry or old newspapers? Yes. And yes. And more. I've sat for many an hour at my home computer pulling up old records like wills and deeds or in the research library at the Historical Society. I've made trips to local repositories like the Connecticut State Library, East Hartford's town hall, and the archives of Manchester's Center Congregational Church. Relatives of Raymond and Thelma have helped with family stories and personal memories. I've read books on topics from stagecoaches to early American agriculture to Connecticut's involvement in the Civil War to get the necessary background to interpret what I've learned about the Woodbridge family.



But some of my best information comes from long-departed members of the Woodbridge family who left behind business papers, letters, account books, diaries, and a houseful of artifacts. Nineteenth-century business records illustrate how they sold different crops as agricultural markets changed. (A shoutout to Beverly Logan who helped organize and catalog those papers!) A faded commemorative portrait of Abraham Lincoln that has likely hung on the parlor wall since shortly after his assassination demonstrates the family's strong pro-Union sentiment. Of particular note are the diaries of George Woodbridge (1856-1929), fourth owner of the Farmstead. We have his journals for almost every year from 1867 through 1928. The books are tiny, the entries minimal but, nevertheless, this is a rich source. The accompanying photo is of George when he was about 10 or 11 years old, about the time he began keeping a diary. For his first entry in his 1867 diary he wrote that he went to school on January 1, 1867.

As we head into the 2025 holiday season, it's interesting to look at what George tells us about the holidays when he was a schoolboy in 1867. On November 28, he notes that it was Thanksgiving but gives no details. As for December 25, 1867, his entry reads, "went to school." It appears that the tradition of disdain for Christmas celebrations among many Protestants was still alive in Manchester in the 1860s.

## Come See the New North End Exhibit at the History Center

On Sunday, October 19th, Mayor Jay Moran cut the ribbon for the grand opening of the new North End Exhibit at the History Center. The event was well attended with over 100 who came to experience the history of the North



From L to R – Dennis Gleeson, Charlie King, Denise Pesce-Boratgis, Emmet Gemme, Jim Sarles, Jay Moran, Ken Roback, Bernie Niedzielski

End of Manchester and the Manchester Fire Department, Eighth Utilities District.

The team from the 8th District Fire Department spent 2 years designing, building, and installing the exhibit. Based on the comments of those who visited on the 19th, it was very well received. The exhibit displays many different facets of life in the North End of Manchester since its early days when the railroad made its first stops in Depot Square.

**Work on the exhibit continues.** The team still meets every Thursday at the History Center at noon. Future plans for the exhibit include the construction of some additional wall display spaces, updates to existing video displays as well as some new video programs. The group is always interested in new artifacts, photos, and stories about the North End.

## America 250 in Manchester

By Steve Armstrong

There is planning taking place for various America 250 events in Manchester during 2026; these events will commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The Connecticut America 250 Commission is planning events that will take place in July in Hartford; details of these events will be announced soon.

In conjunction with the Glastonbury Historical Society, the Bolton Historical Society and the South Windsor Historical Society the Manchester Historical Society is planning three talks to be given by Dr. Matt Warshauer from Central Connecticut State University on the American Revolution and the creation of the Constitution. Dr. Warshauer gave a talk on the Declaration of Independence at the Manchester Historical society on November 11 that was very well received.

Additional talks sponsored by the historical society will be given this spring. Steve Armstrong will speak on how the American Revolution has been viewed over time and on the international impact of the American Revolution. Steve Penny will speak on the years leading up to the American Revolution; Malcolm Barlow will speak on historical “presentism”. Additional talks will be planned for early summer. There will also be a townwide event honoring the anniversary of the declaration; details for this event will be announced soon. If you are interested in taking part in the planning of Manchester’s 250th Anniversary events, contact Dennis Gleeson at the Manchester Historical Society (860-647-9983).



# Calendar of Events

**History Center Exhibits, Library, Office, and Museum Store** at 175 Pine St., open Wednesday to Friday from 10:00 to 2:00 and Saturday noon to 4:00 p.m. located in the former Cheney Machine Shop building. Exhibits include **Manchester Then and Now, business signs** and the **loom room**. The new Eighth District Fire Department and North End exhibit will open mid-October. There is a research library and museum store. Our phone is 860-647-9983 and our email is [info@manchesterhistory.org](mailto:info@manchesterhistory.org).

**Old Manchester Museum** at 126 Cedar Street is open the first Saturday of the month, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. May through December. It is also open by appointment. Please call our office at 860-647-9983 for further information. Exhibits include Manchester manufacturers Cheney Brothers, Bon Ami, Iona, and Norton Electric, our elementary schools both past and present, Pitkin Glass Works bottles, and the story of the Spencer Rifle and its inventor Christopher Spencer. There is also a museum store in the lobby.

**Cheney Homestead and Keeney Schoolhouse** at 106 Hartford Rd. are open the first and third Sundays of the month, May through December, from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. The house is an early American home with period art and furniture, a clock making exhibit, and an art gallery. The Homestead was donated to the Manchester Historical Society by the Cheney family in 1968 for a museum to exhibit and explain the impact of the Cheney family on Manchester. Guided tours include the one-room 1751 Keeney schoolhouse, a partial restoration of one of Manchester's earliest one-room schools.

**Woodbridge Farmstead and former Meadowbrook Dairy**, at 495 Middle Turnpike East, is open the second and fourth Sundays of the month May through October, from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. The Farmstead includes a ca. 1830 farmhouse, a Visitor Center in a barn salvaged from North Manchester, and a late 1700's English barn, as well as foundations of several barns from the days of farming. Early farm equipment is on display along with a one-horse open sleigh and a pony wagon. The Visitor Center exhibits the history of the Manchester Green area in photos. The house interior includes a Victorian era parlor and later sitting and dining rooms. Visitors can park at the municipal lot behind the Senior Center or along the side street to the east of the Farmstead.

**Genealogy Group** meets the second Wednesday of the month at the History Center 10 to noon. The public is welcome to come and ask questions about genealogy research.

See also our website at [www.manchesterhistory.org](http://www.manchesterhistory.org) for more information and possible changes.

**Saturday, December 27, from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. History Hike of Highland Park, Case Parklet at 670 Spring St.** Explore the Case Brothers National Historic District in the Highland Park section of Manchester. Includes history walk, visit to the 1917 cabin, and an optional climb to the lookout with its scenic view of Hartford and beyond. Meet at the small parking lot near the picnic tables.

**Thursday, January 1, 2026 from 1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. New Year's Day Walk on the Great Lawn 146 Hartford Road** This free history walk features the "Great Lawn" and proceeds along streets and lawn to view historic mansions and the nine acres purchased by the Town in 2005 for open space and historic preservation. Cheney District Commission members Tom Ferguson and Susan Barlow will comment on the historic landscape and buildings.

**Saturday, January 10, from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. Cheney Railroad history walk 146 Hartford Rd** Hikers will trace the route of the former railroad, built in 1869 to connect the Cheney silk mills to the main rail line in the North End. At 2.5 miles, it was the shortest private freight-and-passenger railroad in the United States. We will start our hike in the South End, heading north toward Center Springs.



## Winter Sports Were Big in Town

By Dave Smith

In the early 1900s skating and sledding were very popular winter sports, which most people could enjoy without spending much money. Later, when the Northview Ski Slope was opened in 1970 skiing was added to the list of local winter activities.

Center Springs Park and Pond have been a mecca for winter activities for well over 100 years. The slope on the south side of the pond continues to attract kids young and old for sledding and tubing, even though it requires a trudge uphill after every run. Sledding on local hilly streets was common before World War II, when there were not many cars in town.

The pond at Center Springs has hosted many skating events over the years, including hockey games, skating competitions and just plain fun. Seth Leslie Cheney was one of Manchester's better skaters and won his share of competitive events.

Other ponds in town also saw regular skating activity including Union Pond, the Case ponds at Highland Park, Globe Hollow Reservoir, and Walkers Pond on the east side of Walker St. which has since been replaced with a housing development. In recent years skating at the Charter Oak Park rink has been popular.

Snow skiing is a more recent development in Manchester. Undoubtedly the slope at Center Springs Park has been used for skiing, but the dedicated skiing area was Northview Ski Slope on the south side of town



off Garden Grove Rd. near present day Santina Drive. It opened in 1970 and included a rope tow and offered night skiing which was popular. Regular ski competitions were held here for local youth and were called the Manchester State Bank Cup Races.

Unfortunately, during the 1970s snow cover was unpredictable and for several years the MSB Cup Races were cancelled for lack of snow. But in the winter of 1970/1971 snow was abundant and in December 1970 over 7,500 skiers used Northview Ski Slope and 1,200 sledders coasted at Center Springs Park. Northview Ski slope was last operated in 1978 and was closed due to vandalism of the rope tow.

In 1987 attempts were made to reopen Northview Ski Slope, but because of concerns for liability, lack of a rope tow and extensive remedial work to the ski slopes, this did not happen.



*Northview Ski Area Opened Last Night Thanks to Yesterday's Snowstorm and Proved Popular*

Herald photo by Pinto

# Manchester Spruce Tree Decorated Rockefeller Center

*By Dave Smith*

Each year Rockefeller Center in New York City is lavishly decorated for the Christmas holiday season. And each year, in the spring, the folks who administer Rockefeller Center search throughout the northeastern United States for the perfect tree for that year's celebration. This tradition began unofficially in 1931 when Rockefeller Center workers placed a 20 feet tall tree on Christmas eve and decorated it themselves with homemade garlands. In 1933 the first official tree (50 feet tall) was installed and lighted and three years later the famous skating rink was opened.

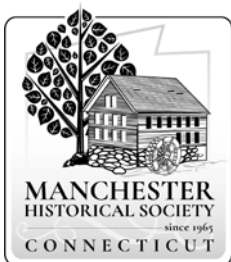
During World War II a tree was installed every year but was not lit because of blackout regulations. In 1942 three smaller trees were used, decorated in red, white and blue. Since then, the trees have been getting taller and the 1999 tree was a 100 foot spruce from western Connecticut.

The 2003 tree came from Manchester, specifically from Tolland Turnpike. It had been planted in 1953 by Frances and Adolph Katkauskas in an open area of their front yard near part of the



drainage system. It grew unhindered for many years and by 2003 it was 79 feet tall. It was a magnificent Norway spruce, perfectly shaped and had been spotted that spring by a Rockefeller crew in a helicopter searching for the perfect tree for that year's installation.

At the tree lighting ceremony that year members of the Katkauskas family were honored guests. Adolph had passed away several years earlier but his widow Frances was there. Her comment was "This is our gift to the world."



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Type of Membership	<input type="checkbox"/> Individual	\$25	<input type="checkbox"/> Family	\$50	<input type="checkbox"/> Contributing Individual	\$60
	<input type="checkbox"/> Senior Individual (65+)	\$20	<input type="checkbox"/> Couple	\$40	<input type="checkbox"/> Contributing Family	\$100
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	<input type="checkbox"/> Life Individual	\$500				

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