

# Making History Every Day

May and June, 2021, Volume 3, Issue 3

*Oxford Historical Society, a 501 (c) 3 charitable organization*

**Twitchell Rowland Homestead Museum**

**P.O. Box 582, 60 Towner Lane, Oxford, CT 06478**

## **MUNN SCHOOLHOUSE WORK GOES ON - AND ON**

Enormous beams were laying on the ground waiting to be trimmed and heaved into place. They are supports for the 'new' floor being installed in the schoolhouse.

The Pandemic Effect has made it more of a challenge to locate and acquire building materials. Prices have jumped due to extreme demand making previous estimates less accurate.

Restoration carpenter Eric Iott continues to meet the challenges the historic school presents. Community support has directed funds to the OHS project but sections need to be addressed in strategic order, a slow process.

### **OUT WITH THE OLD - IN WITH THE NEW!**



### **FLOOR BEAM BEING REPLACED**

**Thank you!** to our friends who voted for the Oxford Historical Society in Ion Bank's 2021 Community Support fundraiser this March. We received a total of \$375 from the annual program for the schoolhouse.

**And more thanks....** Through the CT Community Foundation's Give Local we received donations six times the value of our 2020 amount. Thanks to the donors who supported the OHS with their dollars - nearly \$1,500. Wow! Friends like this make our work more fulfilling. It's great to know you are behind us.

## **VALLEY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION'S GREAT GIVE 2021**

Online donations will be collected for area non-profits in the upcoming event that runs from 8 am Tuesday May 4 through 8 pm Wednesday, May 5. This campaign is run for non-profits in the Greater New Haven area. Oxford is unique and lucky that it fits into the service areas of both the Connecticut Community Foundation and the VCF. If you missed the GiveLocal campaign, this is another opportunity to bring the schoolhouse back to useful life. Donations can be made by credit card or mobile wallet, or even by mailing a paper check to the Oxford Historical Society (PO Box 582, Oxford, CT 06478). Thank you for your continued support and enthusiasm for the efforts of the Oxford Historical Society.

## **WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SO FAR ABOUT MR. MUNN'S 1850 SCHOOLHOUSE IN MOVING AND RESTORATION WORK.**

Preservationists prefer to keep historic buildings in their original location when possible. For the Munn Schoolhouse, the Society agreed to move the structure because the present owners were reluctant to spend the necessary money to preserve what had become a storage building. The Society accepted the gift under the condition that it be relocated and began raising funds and planning for the move and subsequent restoration.

We hired the same mover who had brought the Twitchell-Rowland Homestead from Christian Street to donated land on Towner Lane to save it from demolition. After years of work and fund-raising the Homestead now serves as a museum and history center open to the public. The chance to add the only available one-room schoolhouse left in Oxford to the site was a unique opportunity not to be missed.

Restoration carpenter Eric J. Iott of Seymour was employed to prepare the schoolhouse for moving. He reinforced the building with 2x6 planks, and then removed the roof to allow the building to pass under the power lines along the route to its new home.

When we started we assumed the building was built about 1850 when the school was opened. Work revealed that the first floor was supported by beams which ap-

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peared to be of different ages. Some of them were obviously cut with an ax, while others were cut by a saw in a local mill. Also we discovered that the basement under the building extended only part way under the structure.

From this we concluded that the original building was probably built about the time of the adjacent house at 561 Oxford Road, around 1782. The area which did not have a basement sat on stones and apparently was added when the building was converted for use as a schoolhouse. Further suggesting this interpretation was the discovery of two layers of flooring in the main part of the schoolhouse; the lower layer of wider boards probably original to the 1782 construction and the upper layer installed on top when the building was expanded and upgraded for use as a school house.



In removing the roof, the workers uncovered further indication that the section of the building where the entry door now opens was an extension to an existing building.

Unfortunately, the roof boards had deteriorated and had to be replaced. However we were able to return in place the original rafters and pins to support a new plywood roof. The roof has been finished off with period appropriate cedar shingles.

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The interior of the schoolhouse has wainscoting up to the level of the windows. The upper portion of the walls is plaster. The wainscoting would prevent students from kicking the plaster as they sat in desks attached to the wall.

We plan to furnish the building with old style desks attached to the wall and with benches for seating. There will also be benches in the center of the room where younger students would have sat. We will use the furnishings at several restored early schoolhouses as models for our design.



Still to be learned is the story behind the inscription on a stone which was in the original foundation, and has been relocated to the foundation built at the Historical Society campus. We hope to positively identify the stone mason who engraved it and to decipher the meaning of the mysterious symbols on it.



Though the process had been longer than we anticipated due to the limitations during the pandemic, we have been able to learn a bit more about the history of this unique piece of Oxford's heritage.

The progress we have achieved has been through the generosity and support of many individuals and organizations. When we finally are able to open a complete and restored schoolhouse to the public, the carved names and initials of the students from 1850 will be available for today's residents to read and enjoy. Thanks to all who have helped or will help the efforts in any way.

### **Twichell Rowland Homestead**

Homestead open houses are still suspended due to the Covid 19 pandemic. But things seem to be looking up: vaccines are widely available, face masks and social distance are proving effective. So stay tuned and follow us on Facebook and check the OHS website to see if we are able to open our doors in the near future. We miss you all - stay safe.



Red Currants



Hubbard Squash



Lambs Lettuce



## Oxford's Kitchen Gardens: 1821

Warmer spring days in the vegetable gardens of Oxford in 2021 repeat a timeless ritual handed down from those who lived here 200 years ago. Then as now, soil was being tilled, fertilizer spread, and seeds carefully scattered. Berry bushes were pruned, perennial herbs like sage and thyme uncovered from their winter coat of last fall's leaves and the shoots of ramps and rhubarb promised "spring tonics." However, there was one enormous difference. Long ago Oxford offered no Market 32, no Stop & Shop. If you didn't plant a garden, grow and preserve your food for the year to come, you would go hungry.

In 2021 we speak of heirloom seeds and seed savers, of organic fertilizer and compost. In 1821, these were the only gardening options. There was no commercial fertilizer. Manure from the barn and night soil from chamber pots and privies enriched the dirt. So did the annual crop of autumn leaves. Seeds could be purchased, but cash was hard to come by and they were free if you saved them from last year's pumpkin or squash. While there weren't expensive commercial compost bins, farmers threw vegetable leftovers such as rinds and peels directly on the garden and eventually dug them in.

While the men of the family turned over the earth in the kitchen garden and fertilized it, it became the women's responsibility after that. They planted, weeded, watered, and, with luck, harvested the future crop. Perhaps the family dog or a scarecrow helped chase off the deer, woodchucks and rabbits that came to feast on the young plants.

Some of the bounty went straight to the table for supper. Much was preserved by drying in the hot sun or near the fire or by brining. Root crops would be kept in

barrels of sand in a cool cellar. Apples could be stored the same way or converted to cider. Some other fruits like cherries and peaches could be kept for a period in alcohol such as brandy. Canning was not invented until the 1860's and the Civil War. The orchard might have included peach, pear, apple and plum trees. Common herbs grown for seasoning or medicine or both include thyme, dill, basil, mint and parsley.

As you plant your own garden in the same Oxford soil as those who worked it before us, what you chose to grow, eat, and enjoy with pride may well echo back to those long ago harvests. Happy gardening!

*Some of the information included in this article came from Ann Leighton's **Early American Gardens: "For Meate or Medicine"**. Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press (c1970).*

This is a list of common garden vegetables from early New England.

- Artichokes, Jerusalem
- Beans
- Beets
- Berries including Blackberries, Cranberries, Currants, • Elderberries, Gooseberries and Strawberries
- Cabbage, including Cauliflower
- Carrot
- Corn
- Corn Sallet or Lamb's Lettuce
- Cucumber
- Garlic
- Grapes
- Leeks
- Lettuce
- Melons
- Onions
- Parsnip
- Peas
- Pumpkins
- Potatoes
- Radishes
- Rhubarb
- Sorrel
- Spinach
- Squashes
- Turnip



Beets



Jerusalem Artichokes



Green Beans



Parsnips

## Rhubarb - yum!

The appearance of small red and green shoots signals spring in New England as the stalks and leaves of rhubarb emerge from the soil and unfold.

It is only in the last two centuries that rhubarb was used as an edible food - as a result of the availability of sugar to sweeten the tart stalks. The refining of sugar, making it a staple rather than the rarity it had been in colonial times, allowed cooks to put rhubarb into pies, muffins and jams for casual consumption. General use gave the clumps of red stalks topped with large ribbed green leaves the nickname "Pie Plant."

Rhubarb has been found in medicinal records from China from 5,000 years ago. It is still extensively used today in Chinese herbal medicines and can be found for sale on internet sites. 2000 years ago in Greece and Rome the roots were used as an astringent. Rhubarb is also used widely as a treatment for constipation and inflammation, though scientific causes are not evident. By the 14th century rhubarb was being imported from Russia where it grew along the Volga River. It was carried to Europe through Asia along the Silk Road. Known as Turkish Rhubarb the cost of transporting it across Asia made it more expensive and valued than saffron, cinnamon and opium.

Ultimately seeds were successfully smuggled out to Europe and England. Scots Dr James Mounsey served as physician to the Russian court of Catherine the Great but in 1780 he left Russia with his precious hoard of seeds. A 1788 British cookery book featured rhubarb and recommended it be used as gooseberries would be. It was now a vegetable crop in England and Scandinavia. By 1809 Thomas Jefferson planted rhubarb at his estate, Monticello.

It is usually grown from root divisions rather than from seed. And the leaves are dangerously toxic due to high oxalic acid concentrations but can be composted after removed from the stalks. The mature plants are roughly 3 feet tall and wide and like full sun. Once established the perennial plants are prolific producers!

*The above information can be found on Wikipedia and the Burpee seed website.*



## Heritage Recipe Rhubarb Pie

from The New England Yankee Cook Book by Imogene Wolcott. Coward-McCann, c1939.

Note: This recipe has been tested and slightly altered for modern cooks. It is a rich and creamy version of rhubarb pie with a meringue topping.

For Strawberry Rhubarb Pie substitute 1 cup strawberries for 1 cup of the rhubarb.

Fill one baked 9" pie shell with the following ingredients:

- 2 tbsp. butter or margarine
- 1 ¼ cups sugar, divided
- 2 cups rhubarb, cut into ½ inch pieces
- 2 eggs, separated
- 2 tbsp. cornstarch
- ¼ cup light cream or canned milk
- 1/8 tsp. salt

Melt 2 tbsp. butter or margarine in a saucepan, add 1 cup of the sugar and rhubarb. Cook until the rhubarb is soft and the sugar melted.

Combine the ¼ cup sugar, 2 tbsp. cornstarch, 2 egg yolks (well beaten), ¼ cup light cream or evaporated milk and 1/8 tsp. salt. Add to rhubarb and cook until thick. Cool. Pour into baked pie shell.

Top with the following meringue:

Beat 2 egg whites and ¼ tsp. cream of tartar until foamy. Beat in ¼ cup sugar, 1 tbsp. at a time. Continue beating until stiff and glossy. Beat in ¼ tsp. vanilla. Pile meringue lightly on the rhubarb filling.

Bake at 400 degrees 8-10 minutes or until meringue is browned lightly. Cool to serve.

### Join the Effort to Preserve Oxford's Historic Rural Heritage

- Follow us on Facebook: @oxfordhistoricalsociety
- Like Facebook page to let foundations know the Society has your support
- Join the Historical Society. Download a membership form at <http://www.oxford-historical-society.org/membership.pdf>

#### Once pandemic conditions improve:

- Visit the Homestead and learn more about our activities
- Sign up for special tours and programs