

Making History Every Day

March and April 2025, Volume 7, Issue 2

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

Twitchell Rowland Homestead Museum

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



FIBER FEST

Fiber Fest 2025!

Saturday, April 12 and Sunday, April 13

Come peek into Oxford's agricultural past at the annual Oxford Historical Society Fiber Fest on Saturday, April 12, from 10 am to 4 pm and Sunday, April 13, from 1 to 4 pm. This unique free program takes place on the grounds of the Twitchell-Rowland Homestead at 60 Towner Lane off Route 67 across from St. Thomas Roman Catholic Church. Look for the OHS sheep signs around town!

The event is held rain or shine, and weather permitting visitors can watch shearing of goats or sheep for the spring. The museum is open for free tours.

Local crafters demonstrate using varied fibers for knitting, crocheting, weaving, crafting and more. The New England Lace Makers Guild members will show their timeless skills, keeping this craft alive after centuries. Cobweb-like threads are knotted and twisted into astonishing products with the help of colorful bobbins.

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See the East Family's goats get shorn at the 2025 Fiber Festival on April 12 and 13 at the Homestead.

Women's History Month Program Oxford Parachutist Adeline Gray

On Thursday, March 27, at 6 pm join Town Historian Dorothy DeBisschop at the Oxford Library for her presentation on Oxford's Adeline Gray, the first person to test a nylon parachute.

Admission is free, but requires registration. All are welcome. The Oxford Library is at 49 Great Oak Road. To register and for more information call the library at 203-888-6944.

ADELINE GRAY'S HISTORIC LEAP

On June 6, 1942, 481 Oxford Road was the home of 24-year-old Adeline Gray who achieved fame in a test of a nylon parachute at Brainard Field in Hartford. The Pioneer Parachute Company of Manchester conducted the test before about 50 military officials, proving the safety of their new nylon chute material and design. In 1942 all parachutes were made of silk and the United States' supply was in jeopardy as the country fought against the Axis powers. The Allies desperately needed a reliable alternate supply of safe parachute materials.



Adeline worked at Pioneer as a parachute rigger and eventually became head of the department. At the time of her jump, she was the only woman licensed parachute jumper in Connecticut. She was known already for her many parachute jumps at air shows across the country. Her fame as a dare-devil surprised local Oxford people because she was known as a very shy girl.

Adeline was the daughter of German immigrants, Martin and Pauline Gray. As a child she had become interested in parachutes, reading about parachute jumps. After her historic leap, the St. Petersburg Times of Florida quoted her, saying, "Back home in Oxford, I

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Fiber Fest, continued from page 1



Spinning wheels will be rolling on Saturday under the big tent. Come and watch the rapidly moving hands and feet as raw fibers are twisted into threads and yarn. If your spinning wheel is mobile, bring it along.

On Sunday, knitters collect to offer anyone with needles and fibers the opportunity to pull up a chair to knit or crochet and chat with other creative people.

Some of the dozen artisan crafters and vendors include: Robin Ziegler's handmade brooms, embellished gourd containers and splint baskets. New this year is local weaver Carol McElroy. June Bissonette brings alpaca yarn. Heather Martin offers stone jewelry and Kitti Deak is a regular with her herbs and elderberry. Other regulars will have clothing, knit hats and mittens, embroidered fabrics and crocheted items. Visit the OHS website for photos from some of these vendors: oxford-historical-society.org.

The Litchfield Hills food truck will offer fried dough for sale. Homemade treats are offered as well. Also available are books and notecards produced by the Oxford Historical Society members. These titles feature the old houses and buildings in the town, the history of local railroads, and veterans of various wars and conflicts. The society's notecards offer both photo-based selections of the Stevenson Dam construction a century ago as well as historic shots from the Society's collections, and the newest designs, Claudia Farkas's architectural prints of five of Oxford's historic homes.

All sales and donations from this event benefit the Oxford Historical Society and are focused on finishing the Munn Schoolhouse to open the building to the public.



View of Oxford Road, looking South. Adeline Gray, as a girl, would jump off the barn on the right foreground with an umbrella, pretending to be a parachutist. The building behind the barn is 481 Oxford Road, now a law office. On the left the Oxford Grange is in the foreground and the second Oxford Center School is in the background. (Photo from N. Madorno Family collection.)

Adeline Gray, Continued from page 1.

used to take an umbrella and jump off the hayloft holding it over my head like a parachute. But I ruined many umbrellas.”

During the war, she lived in Hartford and rode a bicycle to work in Manchester. After her famous jump, Adeline Gray was featured in True Comics and became an advertising icon for Camel Cigarettes. Advertisements featured her portrayed in flight gear and sometimes in very feminine evening dress.

One of Oxford's own remarkable women, Dorothy DeBisschop, Oxford Municipal historian since 1987, has a long history of work to preserve Oxford's past. She was a charter member and first secretary of the Oxford Historical Society in 1975. In 2004, she served as chairperson of the Historical Society drive to save and relocate the 1750 Twitchell-Rowland Homestead. That building now serves as the Historical Society's headquarters and museum. Mrs. DeBisschop also worked on the 1975-76 Bicentennial celebration.

She was instrumental in saving and relocating Mr. Munn's one-room school in 2018 from its original site on Oxford Road to the museum campus at 60 Towner Lane. The school building is currently the focus of Society efforts to provide a new opportunity for hands-on education for Oxford children and adults. As chair of fundraising and development of the Oxford Historical Society, Mrs. DeBisschop currently maintains daily history notes on Facebook (@oxford-historical) and has over 3,200 followers.

She is the author of *Historic Personalities of the Lower Naugatuck Valley*; *Oxford History Remembered*, and *Images of Oxford*. These books and more titles are offered for sale at the Twitchell-Rowland Homestead Museum, 60 Towner Lane.

HERITAGE RECIPE: Marilyn Stebar - Chocolate Raspberry Crumb Bars

The little red house at 410 Quaker Farms Road is the perfect site for this issue's Heritage Recipe. Generations of cooks have stirred and baked there for 250 years since the Silas Hawkins' family purchased the land from the Paugasuck Indians for 201 pounds and 15 shillings and built the house in 1795. The structure has never passed from his descendants' ownership and is deeded to remain in the family as long as it is feasible.



Those recipes handed down in the Hawkins family have changed dramatically. Silas's wife, Sarah, would have hefted a cast iron or copper kettle onto the crane that hung over the coals in her kitchen fireplace. The dishes she made would have been created from what the family could grow, hunt, or perhaps buy in the Port of New Haven.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century wives and mothers used a wood or coal burning range and their diet became more varied. In 2025, the latest branch of the Hawkins family tree to add her contributions to the legacy of heritage recipes is Marilyn Stebar who feeds her family from a modern electric stove and a microwave. The dishes on her table contain ingredients that would seem exotic to her ancestor, Sarah.

Marilyn grew up on a farm at 459 Chestnut Tree Hill Road, the oldest daughter of Gerald and Alice (Roberts) Boudreau. Gerry was from Vermont. When Kenyon Congdon, who lived at 402 Quaker Farms Road, placed an advertisement looking for farm help in a local paper, Jerry answered it, and Mr. Congdon drove north to pick up his new hired hand. Alice grew up in her aunt Flora Olsen's home where Marilyn now lives, next door to the Congdon farm, so it was no surprise that they met, fell in love, and were married.

Their lives were busy. The couple had 5 children: Fred, Marilyn, Carrie, Kenneth and Alice. Both were active in town. Alice served on the Board of Education and was



president of the PTA. Jerry was second selectman in the Fred Bice administration. Marilyn remembers him taking his children with him as he drove from door to door, campaigning, the kids inside the car or out as he explained his political views. Jerry also drove a school bus and milked a large, mixed-breed herd of dairy cows. Alice, a graduate of Larison College's (now Quinnipiac) medical secretary's program, was employed at Southbury Training School.

Later, when Alice and Jerry moved to the farm at Southbury Training School where Jerry ran their agricultural program, Marilyn and her husband Ron Stebar, purchased the Chestnut Tree Hill property, living there with their two daughters, Bonnie and Jackie, until 1984 when Marilyn's great-aunt, Flora Olsen, passed away and willed her the little red house at 410 Quaker Farms Road. The couple then made their decision to follow the long line of Hawkins family members who had made it their home.

Marilyn and Ron met at the Oxford Congregational Church youth group as teenagers but waited until Marilyn finished her education degree at the teacher's college in Danbury before their wedding in 1965. She worked as a teacher in the first, second and fourth grades in the Oxford School System for many years. When they married, Ron was in the Army. He had finished his 2-year program to become a carpenter at Bullard Haven Technical School in Bridgeport. Later, he worked in that field for CL&P as well as maintaining his own business, Ron's Woodworking. After they moved to Quaker Farms, Ron began lovingly repairing and restoring the saltbox so that 21st century conveniences are now perfectly blended with the original structure.

Marilyn's lofty goals are responsible for what she believes is her shining accomplishment: the creation of the Christ Church Preschool Program in 1970. Feeling very strongly that children learn at their own pace, she wanted to provide an educational setting where little ones would succeed, learning through play and developing social skills. She considered her own home and St. Peter's Church as a site, but the administration at St. Peter's recommended her own Christ Church and supported her through the logistics with the Episcopal Diocese. Once the philosophical framework was estab-

Heritage Recipe, Continued from page 3

lished, Ron built cabinets to house materials. Marilyn donated her daughters' outgrown toys and the program began, flourished and grew, filling a huge need for Oxford's families.

Another legacy is her leadership role in updating and enlarging "Early Houses of Oxford", originally published in 1976 for the National Bicentennial. Marilyn headed the Oxford Historical Society committee who researched town records, added houses that hadn't been included in the original work, and provided new, color photographs for each historic building. Coverage was expanded to include demolished structures and the town's early schoolhouses. The book, titled "**Historic Buildings of Oxford, Past and Present**," was published in 2016. Marilyn's meticulous files that she gathered during the writing process are now part of the Twitchell-Rowland Homestead's collection.

Heritage is not always something from the past. This is especially true of foods: what we eat and how we prepare it. Marilyn's recipe collection includes dishes from cooks from Oxford's past like her Aunt Flora Olsen and her friend Jessie Dunn. But she, in turn, has added her own family's evolving tastes, likes and dislikes to her collection, and those will become part of the little red house's culinary history too. One such recipe that her 7 grandchildren and 2 great-grandchildren know well is "Chocolate Raspberry Crumb Bars." Originating from a Nestle's advertisement, it follows a delicious combination of chocolate chips and sweetened condensed milk, spiked with nuts and raspberry jam from the Stebar's own garden. Marilyn's ancestor, Silas Hawkins, would not recognize the cookies, but he would love them.

At the Homestead

Open Houses Scheduled – on the first and third Sunday each month the Twitchell-Rowland Homestead is open to the public from 2 pm to 4 pm. Docents chat about the history of the house and the items found inside as well as other topics of interest to the community. There is no charge for these open days: March 2 and 16; April 6. The Homestead is closed April 20 for Easter.

Books produced by the Society are available for purchase as well as unique notecard sets created using local art and photographs. Proceeds benefit the society's events and activities plus maintenance of the buildings and grounds.

On Display: Textiles old & new on show for the Fiber Fest. Society members and friends share weaving selections, embroidery and decorative stitching and other special effects on fabrics collected from all over the world.

HERITAGE RECIPE:

CHOCOLATE RASPBERRY CRUMB BARS - MARILYN STEBAR

- 1 cup (2 sticks) margarine or butter
- 2 cups flour
- ½ cup brown sugar
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 2 cups chocolate bits, divided
- 1 ¼ cup (1-14 oz can) sweetened condensed milk
- ½ cup chopped walnuts
- 1/3 cup (or more) raspberry jam

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Beat the butter or oleo in a large mixer bowl until creamy. Beat in flour, sugar and salt until well mixed. With floured fingers, press 1 ¾ cup crumbs onto the bottom of a greased 13" x 9" x 2" pan. Reserve remaining mixture. Bake the crust 10 – 12 minutes or until the edges are golden brown.

Combine 1 cup morsels and sweetened condensed milk in a small pan. Melt over low heat, stirring until smooth. Spread over the hot crust.

Stir nuts into reserved crumb mixture and sprinkle over chocolate filling. Drop teaspoonfuls of raspberry jam over crumb mixture. Sprinkle with remaining morsels.

Continue baking for 25 – 30 minutes or until the center is set. Cool completely on a wire rack. Yield: 3 dozen bars. These cookies freeze beautifully.

Thank you to Ron and Marilyn Stebar for their time and generosity in sharing family information and helping with this article.

Thank You



Ion Bank's Community Awards Program 2025 Thank You! We are grateful to Ion bank customers who have voted to support community non-profits with funds from the Ion Bank Foundation, sponsor of this event for the past 16 years. Your vote earned us an automatic \$25 in our 'pot'.

OHS membership forms can be downloaded at the OHS website. Mail forms and checks to OHS, PO Box 582, Oxford, CT 06478. Individual memberships are \$10, Seniors and Junior Associates (under 18) \$10, Families \$25 and Business Supporters (\$200).

Member dollars help with society expenses and activities, and the numbers of members are used by grant givers as an indication of involvement with the community. Also listed are opportunities for volunteering. Be sure to check those that appeal to you. Being a member really counts for us!



**Society Dates for 2025 –
mark your calendars and then
look for more as we add events :**

March 27 (6 pm) – Women’s History: Adeline Gray – Dorothy DeBisschop - Oxford Library - free - Registration needed with library: 203-888-6944

April 12 (10 am-4 pm) & 13 (1-4 pm) - 7th Annual Fiber Fest -The Homestead at 60 Towner Lane – free

August 16 (4-7 pm) - Peach Festival - GHUMC, Seymour – Admission charged

October 5 (noon – 4 pm) - Vintage Tractor Meet – The Homestead, 60 Towner Lane – free

November 15 (2-4 pm) - Oxford Historical Society Annual Meeting with program re-enactor Kevin Johnson as ‘Professor Jim’ of Trinity College – GHUMC, Seymour – Admission charged

December 7 (2-4 pm) & 21 (2-4 pm) - Holiday Open House – The Homestead 60 Towner Lane – free

January 4, 2026 (2-4 pm) – Twelfth Night at the Homestead, refreshments - 60 Towner Lane - free

NEW! Summer 2025: Fun@theMunn. First Sundays from 2-4 pm, drop-in - June 1, July 6, August 3 and September 7. Craft & art exploration activities for all ages. - Munn Schoolhouse, 60 Towner Lane – free

**Join the Effort to Preserve
Oxford’s Historic Rural Heritage**

- Follow us on Facebook: @oxfordhistoricalsociety.
- Like our 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>.
- Visit the Twitchell-Rowland Homestead and learn more about our activities. Sign up for special tours & programs.



CCF Give Local April 29 through April 30 online fundraising campaign. Help OHS earn bonuses and prizes as well as contribute to Society events and programs. From 7 am on Tuesday, April 29 through 7 pm on Wednesday, April 30 friends can click on the CCF website (www.givelocalccf.org) during the 36-hour give-athon and register a donation to benefit chosen non-profits. In 2024 the OHS earned over \$1300 in bonuses, donations and matching grants. Help us reach our goal for 2025. Connect online using credit card or Paypal to make a donation and make a difference. Help us grow!



May 7 & 8– Valley Community Foundation’s GreatGive. (www.givegreater.cfgnh.org) This online giving event for area non-profits offers OHS (uniquely serviced by both VCF and CCF) an opportunity for more donations. Last year our supporters helped us reach \$500. This year we aim for \$600. Bonuses can be earned as well. Please consider us again, and thank you to those of you who are such constant ‘friends’ to the Oxford Historical Society.