

350 Years of . . .



STRATFORD TOWN HALL

STRATFORD

**A town looks
to its future
and recalls
its history.**

Reporter learns he has — gasp! — a heritage

By ANDREW MARLATT
Post-Telegram staff writer

Heartless as it seems, I had never heard of, thought of nor cared about Stratford until I took a job in the Stratford bureau of the Bridgeport Post-Telegram in the summer of 1987.

I came here from the rather large state of Georgia. (Georgians always like to say their state is really big compared to Northeast states — it makes us forget about Texans who tell us Atlanta is the size of a Dallas laundromat), and had never been to Connecticut. I knew only three things about it:

- 1) It was small.
- 2) It was the state where Bing Crosby started his Holiday Inn.
- 3) It lacked largeness.

My first few weeks in Stratford were spent trying to spell Housatonic, Pequonnock and Oronoque. (I could spell Short Beach almost immediately). I spent half my time wondering how the Long Island Sound got its name when the waves are so small they hardly make any "sound" at all.

But as I slowly got to know the town, visiting the old buildings and walking the coves and beaches, one thought began slowly to creep into my mind: "Oh, that's nice."

It wasn't a very interesting thought. But to me, Stratford was just another town. What was interesting was that Stratford was about to celebrate its 350th birthday. This



year, covering the anniversary, I discovered plenty about the town that I never knew before. For instance, I learned how to spell Tricentquingenary. Or is it Tricentquingenary?

But the topper was discovering that my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather, Sgt. Francis Nichols, was one of Stratford's original settlers and the town's first military man.

Several thoughts immediately leaped to mind, not the least of which was that I was a Yankee. But the most interesting reaction was that I had a heritage. There was really a connection between myself and the town I covered. As anyone would in my situation, I quickly began altering my recollections of Stratford.

"Didn't I feel something eerie when I first came to town?" I lied to myself. "Didn't I feel like I had known Stratford all my life when I first set foot there?"

After my discovery, I started making calls, going to the library,

visiting local cemeteries and generally dressing sharper. On an old map, I found Sgt. Francis and his son Caleb owned two strips of land on what is now Elm Street between Stratford Avenue and Wells Place. My first thought was: "I want that land back! It's worth a fortune!" But I drove by the property and found someone already owned it. (I'm still considering legal action.)

I further discovered Sgt. Francis' grandson founded Trumbull — then called Unity (the town, not the grandson) — and owned land called Nichols Farm. That area of Trumbull is still called Nichols, and Nichols Avenue and Nichols Elementary School were named for him. I found the graves of several grandfathers and grandmothers in Trumbull, and even photographed them without really knowing why. But sadly, I never found Sgt. Francis, buried somewhere in Stratford in 1651.

Town historian Lewis Knapp told me that Sgt. Francis' grave in the original burying ground by Shore Road was never found. However, during sewer work several years ago in the area, the skeleton of a large man was unearthed, Knapp said.

"Maybe that was him," Knapp offered.

Well, the thought of my great-times-nine grandfather being dug up to make way for a sewer didn't appeal to me, so I decided that couldn't have been him.

But I figured that if I wandered around town long enough, what with me being a grandson and all,

Sgt. Francis would call out to me, beckoning me to his final resting place to pay homage (and hopefully giving me the deed to his land). I did some wandering in the South End of town and was beckoned a few times, but I don't think my ancestor would call me by saying, "Hey buddy, got some nice stereo speakers here. Real tank. Good stuff. I'll cut you a deal."

I've given up hope of finding Sgt. Francis, but in a way, he found me. And besides, I found out a few more things about my ancestors that made up for that loss:

• One great-etc. grandmather married a grandfather, who died, married another man, who soon died, and another man who quickly died and another who didn't make it and another, dead, and another, dead and another before she finally departed. Seven husbands in 40 years. This story of my bloodline makes my wife nervous every time she hears it, but she has been good to me lately.

• Another relative did move South. Maj. Gen. Joseph Wheeler, C.S.A., who fought for the Confederacy in the War of Northern Aggression, 1861-1865.

• Sir Robert Nichols, Sgt. Francis' brother and my great-etc. uncle, was killed when, according to his gravestone, a cannonball "pierced" his body. Now my brother had his ear pierced. I wonder if he got that urge from Sir Robert?

Pierced?

Into the game



Despite the rain, a crowd gathers at a recent softball game at Short Beach. The sport is incredibly popular in town. See story on Page 4.

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Bradlees

Mystery, romance in a stroll

By LOLITA C. BALDOR
Post-Telegram staff writer

STRATFORD — Perched atop the Christ Episcopal Church on Main Street are Stratford's own scars from the French and Indian War.

The golden rooster weathervane, nearly six feet high, was mounted on the church steeple in 1743.

While Colonel Frasier's Highland Battalion camped during the winter of 1757-58, the soldiers used the rooster for target practice.

Its tail still bears the marks.

The church is the first stop in one of Stratford's two historical walking tours that wind through the Academy Hill and shoreline areas of town.

Created last year, after more than 18 months of research, the tours offer a stroll through the mystery, romance and adventure of Stratford's 350 years of rich history.

Once the Indian village of Cuspeag, the town was founded in 1639 and presumably named after William Shakespeare's hometown in England.

See **ADVENTUROUS?** on 5



Post-Telegram/William H. H. H. H.

The Judson House is one of many historical sites and points of interest outlined in "A Walk Through Time."

Happy **350th**

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Post-Telegram/Wayne Robinson
 "Mac's Harbor," traditional landing place of Stratford's first settlers, above, and the town's oldest postal route sign, below, at Elm Street and East Broadway, are among the many sites of historical interest in town. Many are featured in walking tours, which were the brain-child of Barbara Stolis, a member of the town's Tourism Committee.

Adventurous? Take a walk

Continued from 4

The tours are outlined in a booklet, "A Walk through Time," available in Town Hall, 2725 Main Street; the Stratford Historical Society in the Judson House, 867 Academy Hill; and at the Hill and Harbor Convention and Visitors District office, 605 Broad Street.

The Academy Hill Walk takes about 90 minutes and includes 28 stops.

The booklet recounts stories about Stratford's mysterious tunnels, that longtime residents remember playing in years ago.

The tunnels may have been part of the underground railroad during the Civil War, or as an escape from Indians.

The second tour, the shore walk, takes about 90 minutes and includes 25 points of interest. It traces the banks of the Housatonic River around Elm Street.

Included is a stop at Point of View, where George Washington is reported to have crossed the river by ferry on some difficult occasions.



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Softball is serious business

By JEFFREY McMENEMY
Post-Telegram staff writer

STRATFORD — This town loves softball.

It's more than just a game or a way of getting exercise for the people in town who play it.

"It's amazing how popular softball is in Stratford," Recreation director Patricia Patusky said recently.

"There are a lot of people who are extremely serious about it. It becomes their life in the summer. I've seen people reschedule their weddings — both men and women — so they can play softball."

There are 46 different softball teams in Stratford with over 600 people participating in the various leagues that play on 17 different fields, Patusky said.

There's a girls' fast-pitch league, a women's slow-pitch league, a men's slow-pitch league, and a coed league, Patusky said.

She attributes the popularity of the sport to the fact that many girls grew up playing the game and that many men played baseball when they were kids and have switched to softball now that they're older.

The leagues start playing games in mid-April, and some of them



Post-Telegram/Wanda Altmeyer

Bobby Kuhn, of Windmill 100 Proof softball team, is tagged out at home plate by Joe Kubic of Domenic's restaurant.

keep playing until October, according to Patusky.

The champions of the various leagues invariably end up going to regional and state competitions in July and August, where they have performed well in past years, according to Patusky.

But the most successful and best known team in Stratford is the Hi-Ho Brakettes, the defending world champion women's fast-pitch softball team.

The Brakettes are in their 63rd year of operation; in the last 31

There are 46 different softball teams in Stratford with over 600 people participating in the various leagues that play on 17 different fields.

years, they have been to the national championship 27 times and have won those contests all but nine times, according to Bob Baird, the chairman of the Atlantic Coast Women's Softball Association.

The team has also won three world championships, according to Baird, who said they captured the

title in 1974 in Stratford, 1978 in San Salvador, and in 1986 in Auckland New Zealand.

The team was sponsored up until 1985 by Raybestos-Manhattan Inc., but when that company dropped them, the Brakettes were picked up by D'Addario Industries in Bridgeport.

However, the team still plays in Stratford at the Textron-Lycorning field off Main Street, Baird said.

He said during the mid-1970s, the team used to draw crowds of up to 4,000 people, and although the audiences have dropped off some, the Brakettes can still put 500 to 600 people in the stands.

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These pioneers had their eyes on the sky

STRAFORD - When explosions rattled houses at Paradise Cove on Aug. 5, 1911, residents thought the opening Army National Guard war games had begun three days early.

Instead, the Army engineers were blasting rocks on Wilcox's dairy farm to make a runway for the first airplanes to be used under battle conditions. The highlight of the war games came when the squadron of three planes performed extraordinary feats for their time, flying dozens of miles acrossing battle lines between opposing armies. Two of the planes eventually crashed, but the flights were deemed a success.

Sikorsky moved to Stratford from Long Island in 1925.

The aerial victory was witnessed by 10,000 spectators on Aug. 11, but according to some accounts, Stratford residents had watched the attack of flight 11 years earlier.

Reigning resident Gustav Whiteland, a German immigrant and skilled engine-builder, was reported to have flown a two-propeller craft on Aug. 25, 1897. — two years before the Wright brothers became flight's 10th flock, N.Y. In 1902, Whiteland supposedly made two more flights over Stratford and Bridgeport, but no pictures captured the moments, and the feat was not duplicated.

Other feats, including Stanley Beach, were among the precursors of the war, but Stratford's greatest contribution to flight really began in 1911, when it 1911.

After witnessing the Wright brothers at a Riverside demonstration, Ignace Denonovich Sikorsky was born to fly in his own helicopter after two years' failure. He decided to "experiment" and proving the helicopter and built first winged craft. Two years later, he designed and built the world's first helicopter plane, the "Robbin' Ho" 1913.

But the Robbin' Ho never took to the air in 1913, and Sikorsky's aviation production stopped. He decided to return to the U.S. in 1915, and in 1917 he made it to New York. In 1918, he moved to Stratford, Conn., where he set up Sikorsky Aircraft Co. in Long Island. After building several successful aircraft, the engineer designed the first airplane to fly across the U.S. in 1923. He is buried in the town where Sikorsky moved to Stratford

in 1926, taking many of his Russian employees with him. The area of Longship settled by the Russians became known as Russian Beach.

More than 100 S-30s were built. With them, Juan Trippe launched Pan American Airways and Sikorsky began a long friendship with Pan Am consultant Charles Lindbergh. By the mid 1930s, flying boats had seen their day, and Sikorsky decided to go back to the aircraft that was never supposed to fly.

Sept. 14, 1938, was listed on no calendar, and even at the aircraft company — then called Vought-Sikorsky — no big event was planned. But out behind the hangar a small group of men stood by a peculiar assemblage of woodwork, wheels and huge fabric fins, about 100 feet long. It was the helicopter.

Strapped to the machine's finny end, wearing a helmet and oxygen was Sikorsky, who with several engineers had worked for a year on the design. Sikorsky started the engine and brought the rotor up to speed. The machine shook violently in its launch. The nose wheel lifted off. The right wheel was up, then the left. He quickly came back down, but made a few more attempts that day, totaling up only about 11 chaotic seconds of air time. But it had flown.

"I was a bit, but I wasn't going anywhere," Sikorsky later wrote. "We were in three-winged experiment days, waiting to see. Why are we moving?"

Two years later, Sikorsky Aircraft is the biggest helicopter producer in the free world, building \$400 million 1948. About 5,000 employees work at the Stratford plant alone, with thousands more at facilities around the country.

Quoted from James Krugger's book, "The Pursuing Paradise."



Charles Lindbergh, left, and Ignace Denonovich Sikorsky — pioneers in the development of manned flight.

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YOUR OPINION

QUESTION:
What makes Stratford special?

WHERE ASKED:
Main Street, Stratford



Edna O'Donnell
Stratford
housewife
"It's a small town, and everyone's friendly. It's a pleasant place with nice shopping and nice schools. It's a safe area, too."



Dr. S. William Impelitteri
Stratford
oral surgeon
"It's crime free, practically. You feel safe walking the streets at night. It's nowhere near as bad as some neighboring cities."



Michelle Linn
Stratford
secretary
"The beaches. You can just let the kids go, and they can run free. It's nice for adults, too, because we can swim and get a suntan."



Lisa Sherlock
Stratford
mother
"There are a lot of family activities. There are a lot of beautiful parks and many family-oriented activities like Parents Place at Johnson Academy and Sterling House Playground."



Debbie Evans
Stratford
real estate agent
"The educational system. My husband and I both graduated from the school system, and now we have five children in it. There are some negatives, but I think most of the people in the school system do their darndest to make it work."



Timothy Crowley
Stratford
night supervisor
"It's something like a country atmosphere when you come into Stratford. You go into one section and find all the stores. Go into North Stratford, and it's a beautiful country setting."



Michael Koperwhats
Stratford
school principal
"They do a lot for their youth. The athletic program at Sterling House is a fine one, for example."

Some Things Improve With Age

Town home for the inventive

Stratford has had its share of famous inventors and inventions — Igor Sikorsky's helicopter, Alfred Ely Beach's subway and Tom Berquist's Boogers.

A former product development expert for General Electric Co. and Times, Berquist invented Boogers three years ago while sitting around the dinner table discussing why children like vulgar things. He came up with Boogers, a fruit-flavored, gummy candy which has been on the market since last fall and is "one of the better kids' candies on the market," according to Berquist.

Boogers is not the only unusual candy idea from Berquist, 42, who said he helped develop the General Electric smoke alarm and a line of Times watches. He is also the inventor of Band Hill Gum, bubble gum that looks and feels like sand.

Boogers has garnered national attention for Berquist, who calls himself more of a marketing man than inventor. But perhaps no Stratford invention is more famous — and its designer more obscure — than the subway.

In 1869, Alfred Ely Beach designed and built the first subway in New York City. The tunneling machine designed by Beach, who moved to town in 1866, was used to dig under the Hudson River and the Thames River in England.

"He's really my favorite," said Town Historian Lewis Knapp. "Here he did this great thing and nobody seems to know about him."

Stratford



Population: 21,229
 Median house price: \$190,000
 Student spending: \$1,122
 Annual rainfall: 35.15 inches
 Government: Town councilman manager since 1921

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FAST FORWARD

Learning from the past, looking to the future

From its 300th year in 1939 to its 350th year in 1989, Stratford saw few dramatic changes. Industrial firms are still the top employers. The town manager/council form of government remains intact. Even many of the schools which stood then still stand now.

But what of Stratford in the next 50 years? What will it mean to be a Stratfordite in the year 2039 on the town's 400th anniversary? Post-Telegram reporters Jeffrey McMenemy and Andrew Mariatt asked politicians, planners, police, educators and others about what the next five decades will bring.



Ronald Owens Town manager



"Ever since I've been in Stratford, (he arrived five years ago), I've felt Stratford was at a crisis point. And our fate is really tied to Bridgeport."

Within the next decade, Owens believes Bridgeport will begin a renaissance which Stratford can either follow or watch. The town's response will dictate whether Stratford becomes a successful community of professionals and high-tech industries or a town in decay.

"It's classic. As cities begin to rebuild, it pushes the depressed areas out. I see Stratford as having two alternatives. We can provide housing for the professional, technical and high-skilled people moving into the Bridgeport area ... or if we go the other way, we'll provide a place to live for the people with less income. We'd be faced with the exact same problems as Bridgeport has now."

If local government and residents put money back into the community — renovating schools, houses and the like — Stratford will be ready for the change. If not, the town's next anniversary may be a bleak one.

"I don't think Stratford can remain the same in the next 50 years. You can't just put your foot down and say 'This is the way I want it to be.'"

Richard Buturla Town Council chairman



"Stratford in 50 years will still be a town of people of all types and all income levels. I think we'll keep that balance that we now have between industrial, commercial and residential."

Contrary to Owens, Buturla believes Stratford will remain the same "solid middle-class town." As long as education is given enough support to feed local industries such as Sikorsky and Textron-Lycoming, the mix of businesses and homes will hold. Buturla, too, is concerned about spillover from Bridgeport, but says the main struggles will be with the environment and overdevelopment.

"We have to preserve the single-family character of our neighborhoods. We can't allow developers to maximize profits by allowing too many multi-family homes. We're really going to be able to control our destiny."

Leonard Petruccelli Board of Education chairman



"We'll have to really watch out for funding. The way taxes and the economy are going, people are going to be less likely to want to pay for education."

Stratford's ever-increasing senior citizens population could threaten school funding to pay for the Information Age, Petruccelli says. From 1990 to through 1999, the town's 65-and-over population has gone from 15 to 21 percent of the total population, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates. The number of schoolchildren aged five to 19, however, has dropped 6 percent. If the trend continues, the elderly without children and on fixed incomes either won't want or won't be able to pay for education, Petruccelli said.

"It's not going to be like the old days when a pencil and blackboard were sufficient. Costs are going to go up."

Rob Men



will have talent, ing "im The develop not on towns, "W ity boys port ha Stratfo



1639 Rev. Adam Blakeman and company travel from Wethersfield to found Stratford, then called Cupheag or Pequonnock.

1681 Goodwife Bassett hung for witchcraft.

1739 Stratford charter approved by state General Assembly.

1780 Gen. George Washington meets Gen. Lafayette in Stratford.

1787 Stratford resident William Johnson signs U.S. Co



Frederick Beach took this photo looking down Stratford's Main Street in April 1989.

Walter Dunbar
Superintendent of schools



"A lot of people who went to school in 1939 would be comfortable in the schools now. There haven't been that many fundamental changes. But I see dramatic changes in the next 50 years."

Classrooms with empty desks will be replaced with computer terminals and laser-discs by 2000, Dunbar said. Teachers will remain but their roles will be different in the coming Information Age. Pupils will sit in large rooms at voice-activated computers gathering much of their information. The students will then break off into smaller groups, maybe 10 or so, with teachers explaining what the youngsters learned.

Adult education will be more important than ever and Stratford residents of all ages will go back to school to keep up. The current system of grouping students by grade and age will change. Pupils instead will be grouped by ability, with 13-year-olds on the same level with some 15-year-olds and vice-versa.

As the world shrinks, more foreign languages than the current Spanish, French and Latin will be taught. Social services also will expand to deal with the emotional instability brought on by an increasing number of single-family homes and mobile families.

David Killeen
Town planner



"I think we'll see a greater emphasis on the town's coast line and a greater marketing effort on recognizing those coastal resources."

In terms of problems and issues, the biggest ones will be solid waste disposal and the continuing cleanup and conservation of waterways and airways, according to

Killeen. Other problems will probably include affordable housing, Killeen said.

He said household size in Stratford will probably remain small because of the cost of housing in town.

"In looking at housing costs, there's often the need to have two individuals working in a household just to make ends meet," Killeen said. "That dictates the size of the household you can have."

Killeen predicted in 50 years most or all of the town will have been developed, which will lead businesses to look toward redevelopment of any under-used industrial areas.

He believes the town will continue its shift away from manufacturing concerns toward more high-tech industries.

Robert Sammis
Member of harbor commission



"The waterfront represents a grand and abundant resource for Stratford. Our challenge as regulators and activists is to preserve, protect, and enhance these resources so that those who view the marshes and the sound 50 years hence will say, 'Well done.'"

Sammis said the town will have to make a commitment in terms of time, talent, and dollars to achieve this end or risk causing "irreversible damage" to the waterfront.

The biggest threats to the waterfront are over-development and pollution of water resources — not only locally but also up river in neighboring towns, according to Sammis.

"We have to begin to think about water quality beyond our own borders. What success Bridgeport has in cleaning up its harbor greatly affects Stratford," Sammis said.

William Milne
Deputy police chief



"I think there'll be more drugs coming into town unless government uses all resources to stop it. With the increase in drugs will come an increase in homicides, burglaries and larcenies."

The 36-year veteran of the Stratford Police Department said the increase in drug use and sales will likely be fueled by dealers in Bridgeport spreading out into Stratford.

Milne said in order to combat the threat of more drugs and drug-related crime in Stratford, the size of the police force will have to be gradually increased.

Milne said over the next 50 years he hopes to see a reversal of recent court decisions that have "eroded the powers of police in the area of searches, while the victim's rights have decreased."

Pat Naylor
Community services director



"I really think that Stratford is going to have to take a look at the services we provide — especially how we support families."

As the years wear on, the number of families with two working parents should continue to grow and problems associated with that trend — youngsters getting less attention and supervision — could become greater.

Government offices may have to hold unusual hours to accommodate families that can't make daytime appointments. Church and civic groups also will play a larger role in supporting families and, Naylor believes, people will become more involved in community activities.

"I know that sounds like a contradiction because people have less and less time. But I think there will be more concern. People will be expecting town committees, the Town Council and Board of Education to be more responsive to community needs. They'll have to be."

Chairman

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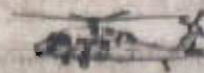
Stratford resident William Samuel Johnson signs U.S. Constitution.



After bitter political struggle, Bridgeport is created out of western Stratford.



Stratford begins town manager/council form of government, one of first towns in nation to do so.



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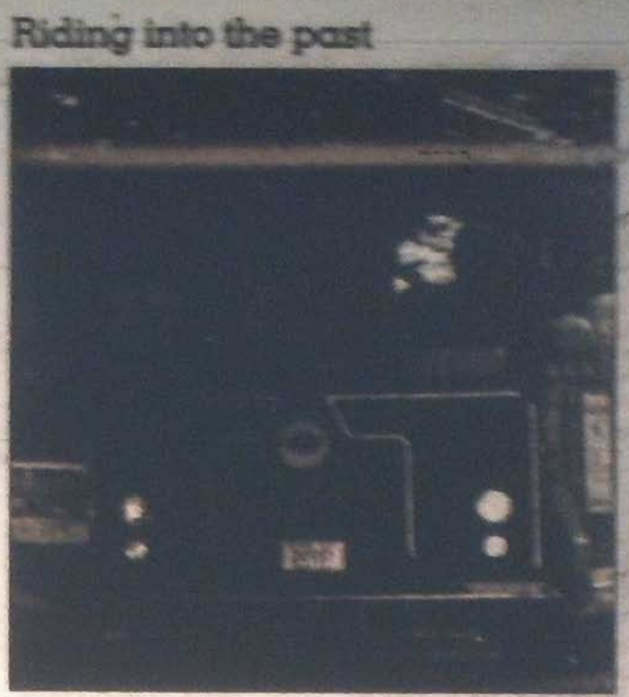


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- June 18: Sterling House Arts and Crafts Show.
- June 24: Stratford Day, Main Street.
- July 2: Stratford salutes the 4th of July, Short Beach.
- July 5: 60th anniversary of Sikorsky Memorial Airport.
- July 18: Historical Crafts Fair, Academy Hill.

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- Aug. 3-7: Sister Cities Week.
- Aug. 11: Airshow reception, Stratford Ramada.
- Aug. 12-13: 350th Airshow, Sikorsky Memorial Airport.
- Aug. 24: Japanese Friendship Tour, Pony League.
- Sept. 15-17: 350th Saloon, Sterling House.
- Sept. 17: Reception for 350th History Book, Town Hall.
- Oct. 7: 350th Intra-Community Marathon Run.
- Oct. 7: Founders Day Parade.
- Oct. 8: Curtis and Hawley Family Reunions.
- Oct. 13-14: Town and Country Fair, Stratford Methodist Church.
- Oct. 21: Igor Sikorsky's 100th Birthday.
- Nov. 5: Guided tours of burying ground, First Congregational Church.
- Nov. 12: 350th Harvest Fair, Stratford Armory.
- Nov. 28: Jaycees Annual Christmas Dinner, Stratford Armory.
- Dec. 2: 350th 1850s Dance, Town Hall Green.
- Dec. 16: Time capsule dedication, Town Hall Green.

This mural on the wall of the Council Chambers of Town Hall depicts the first settlers of Stratford coming ashore at Mac's Harbor. Town historian Lewis Knapp, however, believes the first settlers actually came by land, not boat.



Photo: Telegraph; Bob Lumbay Jr.

Mural: true to life or legend?

In the Council Chambers of Town Hall, a huge mural depicts the first settlers of Stratford coming ashore at Mac's Harbor in 1639.

The exhausted settlers are on the beach, giving thanks for their safe arrival.

While no one claims the painting is an exact reenactment of the original founding, chances are it may not even be close.

Legend has it that the first settlers of Stratford — 17 to 25 families — came here by boat. But, according to town historian Lewis Knapp, chances are that the settlers — more like 70 to 100 of them — came by land from Wethersfield in the spring of 1639.

At the time, two British colonies existed in the state — the New Haven Colony and the Connecticut Colony, comprising Hartford, Wethersfield and Windsor. In the spring of 1639, the governor and General Court of the Connecticut Colony began discussing a possible new settlement at the mouth of what is now called the Housatonic River.

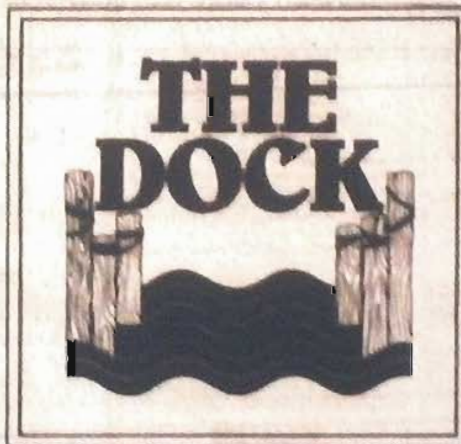
The farmers in Wethersfield, latecomers to America and working on poor land, heard rumors of the new settlement and left early, Knapp believes.

"It seems as though they didn't tell anybody, they just left," said Knapp, who believes the settlers came by land because they lacked enough boats to carry people, supplies and livestock.

In the fall of that year, colony officials sent Deputy Gov. Roger Ludlow to start a settlement at Stratford, then called Cupheag Plantation. But when Ludlow arrived, he found some of the Connecticut Colony's people already had settled here, Knapp said.

sent down a sergeant to drill the recruits and give them a loyalty oath to the Connecticut Colony, securing the Stratford area for their own.

Happy 350th!



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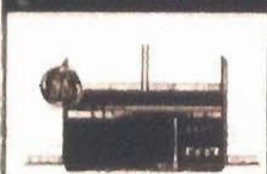


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Post-Telegram/Leo A. Toth

In a double-exposure photograph, a Civil War soldier appears to hover over a Union uniform at the Boothe Homestead. Visitors have reported feeling an eerie presence in the Civil War Room.

Those sounds and feelings that are hard to explain

By JEFFREY MCMENEMY
 Post-Telegram staff writer

STRATFORD — There have long been stories about the Civil War Room at the Boothe Park Homestead.

Since the room was opened to the public in May of 1987, numerous people have complained about an eerie, uncomfortable feeling soon after they walk in the door.

Those experiences have continued, according to Boothe Park Commissioner Bessie Burton, who recently said that close to 100 people of all ages have complained about the room and the feelings of sadness and oppression it brings.

The experiences have ranged from a first-grade pupil's complaint about feeling chills in the room on a 90-degree day to an elderly woman's fainting when she went into the room, Burton said. Many others have walked into the room and then walked right back out, saying they had to get out into the hall.

The experiences have become so commonplace that park officials keep a chair by the door in case anyone feels faint.

But in April, the staff reported inside the 1840 homestead left to the town by the eccentric Boothe brothers, David and Stephen, spread from the Civil War Room to outside another bedroom,

according to Helen Chagaris, another park commissioner.

On separate occasions in April, another commissioner and a staff member at the facility, who were alone in the house at the time, heard a woman's voice coming from outside Mrs. Boothe's bedroom, according to Chagaris.

The staff member said she was sitting in the kitchen downstairs when she "very distinctly" heard a woman's voice coming from upstairs.

She went to the staircase and called out hello, but nobody answered. As she started to go up the stairs, the voice disappeared.

A week later, a commissioner was sitting alone and also heard a woman's voice, according to the staff member.

"She was very upset by what had happened, and it convinced me that I had actually heard something and wasn't just imagining things," the staff member said.

But as to the current situation at the Boothe Homestead, there are still many unanswered questions.

"I haven't experienced anything inside the room or heard anything myself, but I know the people who've felt things or heard things and I believe they're telling the truth," Burton said. "I just don't know how to explain it."

Rumor has it: from old age to young love

Ben George Washington passed through Stratford every winter, and although never built the first wooden dock that is now several blocks from Stratford Landing Bridge by there he never actually docked in Stratford.

"He did stop to eat lunch, though," Knapp said.

Later, Holmes Wheeler, three men into knew a good dock when they made one.

In 1860, Alfred Loring moved to Stratford and brought his docks with him. One of the first great dock carvers, Loring founded the school of dock dock carving in town. Because real Stratford docks keep their brackets high to keep them out of rising tides and storm currents, Stratford docks are known for their high brackets. They are also known for their high prices.

When Loring died in 1887, his carvings were worth \$45. Now they sell for \$3,000 to \$25,000 each. But that's peanuts compared to the work of Charles "Shang" Wheeler, the last of three famous Stratford carvers who followed the work of Ben Holmes Wheeler, who died about 30 years ago, is considered one of the best ever in his field, and some of his docks fetch \$100,000.

Moore Wheeler, one of the first settlers in Stratford, also is believed to be New England's first centenarian. He died in 1890 at the age of 100. The first person to run the ferry between Milford and Stratford, Wheeler is the namesake of the I-95 bridge spanning the Housatonic River between the two communities.

Popular belief has it that Stratford is named for Stratford-Upon-Avon in England. After all, the town built the American Shakespeare Theatre, (now called the American Festival Theatre), after the home of Britain's most famous playwright.

But Town Historian Lewis Knapp said England has four towns named Stratford, including two in the area believed to be the original home to the later Connecticut colonists. "It could be any one of those," he said.

Legend has it the infamous pirate Capt. Kidd buried treasure all along the Connecticut coastline, and Stratford has staked a claim to the story.

Some of Kidd's loot was supposedly found in the Thomas Wells House on Elm Street and, according to Dee Watt, designer of the Hometown Stratford trivia game, some believe more treasure is buried somewhere around the beaches of Leadership.

Cinderella was more than just a fairy tale in Stratford. In 1771, Stratford resident Giovanna Feloni, daughter of a local blacksmith, was swept off her feet by the son of a wealthy family. The two married in Stratford, without getting Bridget's consent, after which young John left his bride.

Historians are gripped with the 1771's second "dick" when John Feloni asked John and John went back to Stratford. He left his wife behind, leaving townsmen believing the young husband had been killed. But in Hollywood fashion, a ship taken with riches and


wealthy family came for Feloni, who joined the boatload to Stratford. She was the only woman to survive the storm and Lady Stratford.

All of Stratford's military men, perhaps more did more for the country than Capt. Samuel Duck

During the War of 1812, Duck took the 12th and 13th regiments "through" the British, but also received honors in British service. The strategy made more than \$1 million from the military printing, leading alone just making the grade and being in the way.

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An original of the Magna Carta was part of the "Roads to Liberty: Magna Carta to the Constitution" exhibit that traveled to 26 states to commemorate the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. Stratford resident Fred Bisbel was founder of the exhibit.

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'Roads to Liberty' tour started off from Stratford

In 1987, 200 years after Stratford native William Samuel Johnson signed the U.S. Constitution, another Stratford resident decided Johnson's signature and the famous document should see America. Resident Fred Bisbel organized the "Roads to Liberty" traveling exhibit, a specially equipped tractor-trailer that took original drafts of

the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Magna Carta on a nationwide, 10,000-mile journey. After the exhibit was set up in Stratford, the traveling show officially began with a ribbon-cutting ceremony in the White House Rose Garden on March 11, 1987. It ended Sept. 20, 1987, in Philadelphia.

Approximately 300,000 Americans from St. Paul, Minn., to Mason, Ga., passed through the exhibit before the truck returned to Stratford in October of 1987 to be taken apart.

Among the articles in the trailer were an original 1787 draft of the Constitution belonging to Pierce Butler, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention; and the best of four remaining copies of the Magna Carta, a document signed by King John of England in 1215 that expresses many of the ideas on government reflected in the Constitution.

The collection also included original copies of the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, which was issued by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, and for each state along the tour, an individual display of historical state documents.

Bisbel, long active in politics, served as a Stratford commissioner, an GOP state chairman and as a deputy chairman of the Republican National Committee.


He is now the principal executive of the privately-financed Connecticut World Trade Association.

His son, Kevin, devoted several months to the project and by beating a trailer to fit his needs. The younger Bisbel labeled the tour as a "race to a historic opportunity."

He said there is no reason why we have them and why might to make them. "Not all of them," he said.

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Theater struggles for a comeback

By LOLITA C. BALDOR
Post-Telegram staff writer

STRATFORD — The curtain of the American Festival Theatre will rise again this summer, and with it the hopes that it will spark an economic rebirth in town.

The theater, which has not hosted a full summer season since 1983, is the subject of a unique cooperative venture between the state, the town and a private board of trustees.

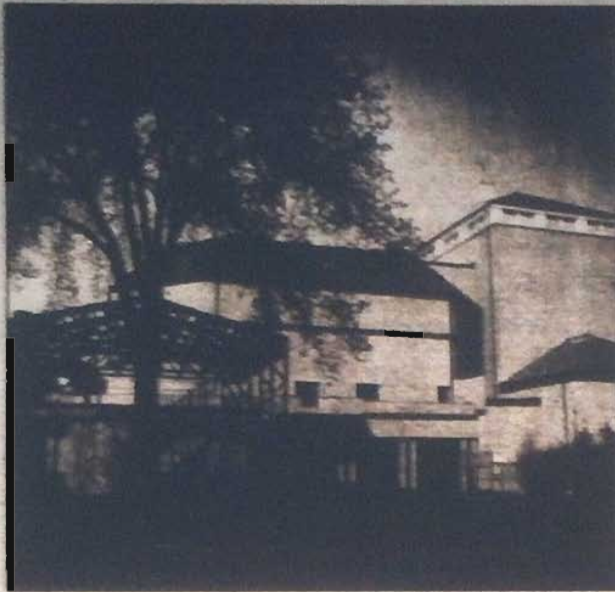
Once the site of lavish, star-studded Shakespearean productions, the theater is now part of a Herculean struggle to revive its glory days.

State officials, from Gov. William A. O'Neill on down, to local political and business leaders, have set their sights on revitalizing the theater as a major tourism draw in the state and even New England.

A prosperous theater, they reason, will improve not only the economic health of the town, but also the region and the state.

The non-profit board of directors that ran the theater since its inception in 1965 declared bankruptcy and finally sold the property to the state in 1983. Now a state park, the theater building and grounds has been the subject of studies, a blue-ribbon task force, and unending repairs during the past six years.

Last year a new board of trustees



Post-Telegram/Wayne Patterson

The American Festival Theatre, undergoing a facelift.

took the helm and began the slow process of renovating and revitalizing the theater. The prestigious New York City architectural firm of James Stewart Polshek has been hired to redesign parts of the building and create a master plan for its use.

Polshek is best known for his restoration of the renowned Carnegie Hall in New York.

Cumbersome bidding procedures and funding guidelines have frustrated the board members who, as top corporate executives, are unused to the snail-like pace of gov-

ernment projects.

Top state officials, including Anthony V. Milano, secretary of the state Office of Policy and Management, have been forced to mediate between the board and state department heads who are responsible for the bidding and repairs.

"If we can get the theater operating," said Stratford Town Manager Ronald Owens, "I think by going through this process, it will be a strong entity. If it is going to fail, it will fail early on, the battles are very frustrating, but it will make for a successful theater."

Both Owens and Neil Sherman, vice president of the Bridgeport Business Council, agree that a thriving theater will be a boon to the region, pumping more than \$1 million into the economy.

"As in any new venture, the first couple of steps are going to be fraught with problems," said Sherman. "But, I think we're going to iron out the difficulties."

Board members have been reluctant to discuss specific plans for a summer season, but last month state officials solved problems that were stalling production efforts.

Now, officials say they are finalizing plans for what is expected to be a short performance season designed to coincide with the town's 350th birthday.

That season, officials hope, will mark the beginning of a new golden era for the Bard.

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Facts and fables

Town's history fills pages of new book

By **ANDREW MARLATT**
Post-Telegram staff writer

STRATFORD — Looking back on 350 years, Lewis Knapp has a lot of favorites.

Near the top of the list is John Birdseye, who in 1649 fled to Stratford after kissing his wife. It was Colonial law, not the kissing, which caused the man to run.

"He lived in Milford, but kissing your wife in public in Milford was against the law," said Knapp, Stratford's town historian. "So he jumped in the (Housatonic) river

and swam across to Stratford. Kissing wasn't against the law here."

Birdseye's story, along with hundreds of other facts and fables, is included in Knapp's new Stratford history book, "In Pursuit of Paradise," which should be out by August.

With 374 pages and 350 illustrations and pictures, the book has been Knapp's obsession the past year and a half. He has spent more than 5,000 hours compiling stories, checking facts and, as all good historians do, challenging legends and myths.

One such legend involves Goody

Bassett, who was hanged for witchcraft in Stratford in 1651.

While few today would argue Bassett was a real witch, Knapp said he believes Bassett and her husband may just have been "troublemakers" passing through town who got in an argument with local authorities.

Although there is some question concerning who the Bassetts were, Knapp said a man and woman named Bassett were thrown out of New Haven for challenging authority there and were probably going through Stratford on their way to Stamford when their personalities

again clashed with local law.

"At that time, all you needed was to be mad at somebody and you took care of them," Knapp said.

□□□

Knapp's book — finished with the help of 12 writers all working for free — is the third history of Stratford. The other two are "History of Stratford" by William Howard Wilcoxson and "The History of Stratford and Bridgeport" by Samuel Orcutt.

While some of the new history retraces steps taken by the previous two authors, most of the material is new, including sections on oystering, aircraft and dock carving.

Bridgeport resident John Kochiss, who grew up watching oyster boats from his family's cottage on Long Beach, wrote a chapter on the town's once enormous oystering industry.

The biggest business in the area at the turn of the century, oystering employed thousands of locals. But while most consider an oyster good eating, in Stratford, the only good oyster was a dead oyster — or at least an inedible one.

That's because Stratford's main contribution to the industry was the seed oyster. These small, inedible oysters, taken from the Housatonic and on the shore, were sold to harvesters in several other states and used as seeds to grow larger, edible oysters.

Empty oyster shells, which Kochiss said line some sections of the Housatonic up to 50 feet deep, also were a money source. Workers called "shellermen" dug up the shells and sold them to harvesters. The shells were used as a bed for new oyster colonies, Kochiss said.

□□□

From oystering to aircraft, sea captains to shipbuilding and religion to the American Revolution, Knapp's history book shows a Stratford that mirrors the history of the nation.

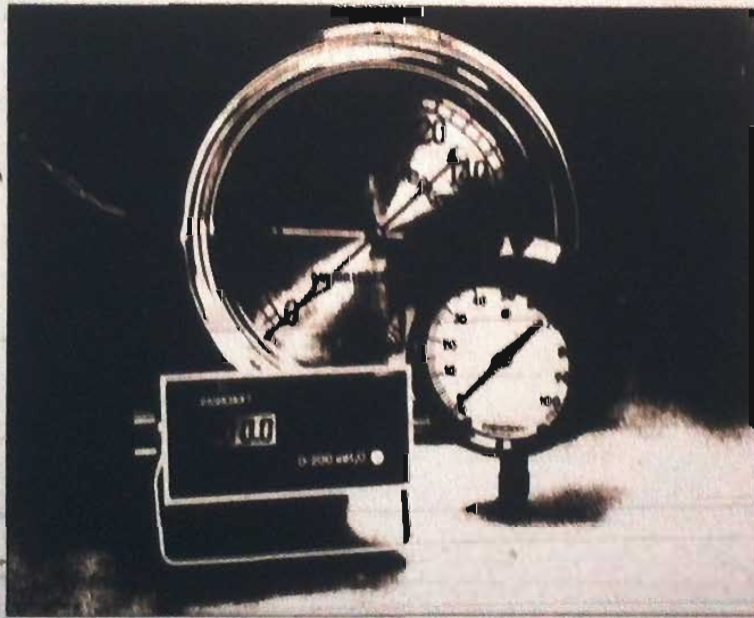
"As Stratford history goes, so goes the history of the country, is what I found," Knapp said.

"In Pursuit of Paradise" immortalizes Stratford residents who have shared in the best parts of American history: post rider Ebenezer Hurd, who took the news of Lexington and Concord to New York City; unknown citizens who hand-delivered food and money to 15 Stratford men fighting at Valley Forge; sea captains John Sterling and Polaski Benjamin, two of half a dozen locals who made record runs across the Pacific to China along the trade routes; Igor Sikorsky, who invented the helicopter; William Samuel Johnson, signer of the U.S. Constitution.

The book also tells of a few who mirrored the seamy side of U.S. history: sea captain John Selby, who decided he didn't want to declare

Stratford, so he sailed up the Hou-

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Post-Telegram/Rob Lantry Jr.

Lewis Knapp, Stratford's town historian, is the author of "In Pursuit of Paradise," a new Stratford history book.

History

Continued from 18

satonic and hid the barrels, then was caught and sent to jail, and the ship was sold; members of the Boardman family, who were involved in counterfeiting in the 1750s; the son of Stratford's founder, the Rev. Adam Blakeman, who was run out of town for fornication.

□□□

"I'm not happy with it," said Knapp of his first and probably last book. "I'm never happy with what I complete. I can always do better."

Of the 4,000 books to be printed, 1,000 books have been sold before publication at \$26 a copy. The price will go up to \$32.50 after the book comes out, and Knapp said 2,800 have to sell to break even.

All proceeds from "In Pursuit of Paradise" will go to the Stratford Historical Society.

But Lewis Knapp's work will not be the only 350th anniversary book to come out this year. His wife, Vivienne, has just published a recipe book called "Paradise Know... Treasures from Yesterday's Kitchens." The book of 120 recipes — all at least 50 years old — sells for \$8, with the money going to the historical society.

"I made the mistake of letting Knapp said, "and the next thing you know, she's competing with me."

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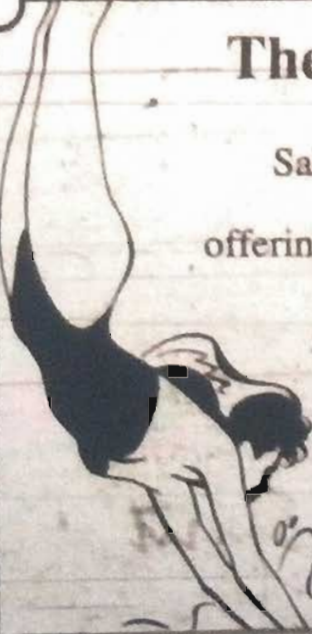
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