

Williamstown, MA
Spring 2022

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The Five Corners District and Sloan Tavern

by Kirk Scott

The natural landscape of the Five Corners District is described by the Massachusetts Historical Commission as being “visually cohesive and contributing to the overall aesthetics,” as it “plays a significant role in conveying the development patterns of the [District].” Indeed, the topography has played a significant role in creating this meeting place of important routes and old Mahican trails into and out of Williamstown since before the time of earliest settlement of the West Hoosac Plantation. This created a unique setting that contributed to the development of South Williamstown in the nineteenth century as a distinct community as well as a connecting hub between Williamstown and communities to the south and west.

Although Williamstown was incorporated in 1765, the road to the south was begun by the town and the county in 1762, using the elevated land to the north to bypass the frequent washouts on the lower river routes. In that same year, Isaac and Mary Stratton became the first settlers at Five Corners, building a log cabin home that also served as a tavern. Stratton set aside the site for the Southlawn Cemetery in 1769. It is thought that archeological remains of Stratton's cabin remain beneath the present store. In 1767, Samuel Sloan, a blacksmith by trade who would serve at the Battle of Bunker Hill as part of the Berkshire Regiment, bought the site of the current store and there built a tavern in 1770. Sloan's Tavern remains as the core of the present building that was added to over the years. Although Sloan was, as previously mentioned, a blacksmith by trade, he finished the War for Independence with the rank of general and became a successful land owner/speculator, making his fortune by

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is with gratitude and humility that we acknowledge that we are learning, speaking, and gathering on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people, who are the indigenous peoples of this land. Despite tremendous hardship in being forced from here, today their community resides in Wisconsin and is known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. We pay honor and respect to their ancestors past and present as we commit to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.



holding land during the inflationary period following the war. Sloan built the finest house in Williamstown in 1802; a building that since 1838 has served as the core of the Williams College President's home.

In 1816, the tavern passed to Nathan Rossiter, and served as South Williamstown's Post Office beginning in 1827. It then passed to John Jordon from 1833 until 1865 under the name Jordon's Tavern. Jordon added a second story with a porch to the tavern, which served as a space for town meetings every third year. The expansion of the tavern into its present design makes it one of the many fine examples of Greek Revival architecture in Williamstown, a style popular in the area in the 1830s.

In the early 19th century, the growth of industry brought manufacturing to Five Corners to take advantage of water power. The growth of glass and iron furnaces and lime kilns to the south and the growing need for charcoal to fuel them brought many to the Five Corners area for its plentiful supply of timber. Transportation to the south became ever more important. Regular stagecoach service between Williamstown, South Williamstown, Hancock, New Ashford, Pittsfield, and Berlin, New York, was initiated during this period, with Jordon's Tavern serving as a stagecoach depot. The importance of Jordon's Tavern as a rest stop between

Williamstown and the towns to the south is illustrated by the account of future Massachusetts senator and hero of the antislavery movement, Charles Sumner. Sumner spent September 1844 in Lenox and Pittsfield as a guest of Nathan and Theresa Appleton, of Boston Associates fame, and the in-laws of his close friend Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Sumner also spent time with the Sedgwick family and noted Abolitionist and actress Fanny Kemble on this visit. On September 8, 1844, Sumner visited Williamstown and North Adams with Lenox Transcendentalist Samuel Ward, stopping at Jordon's Tavern to rest on their way into Williamstown. The tavern was purchased by Nathan Field in 1866 and in 1875 by Thomas Sabin, who named it Sabin House.

Purchased by John Steele in 1905, the tavern and inn were converted to a general store. With the advent of automobile travel, the site was less important as a rest stop for weary horse-drawn travelers and more important as a grocery store/local "hangout," although Steele added gas pumps (no longer extant) in the mid-20th century. The generosity of Mr. Steele during the years of the Great Depression was legendary, and many older locals still think of Five Corners as "Steele's Corner." In 1978, the Steele family sold the property to Rhode Island governor and heir to the Vanderbilt fortune, William Vanderbilt, who renovated the property and sold it in 1985. The Store as well as the Five Corners District were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992. The Store at Five Corners closed in 2011, ending 241 years of continuous operation, making it one of the oldest continually operated businesses in the United States. It was reopened in June 2012 but closed again during the recent Covid-19 pandemic. The Store at Five Corners Stewardship Association reached an agreement to purchase the store in December 2021, with plans to reopen the iconic and historic business in the spring or summer of 2022 so that it may remain a hub for the community and visitors alike, as well as a connection to Williamstown's deep past.

The mission of the Williamstown Historical Museum is to promote interest in the history of the Williamstown area by collecting, cataloging, and preserving items of historical significance, and to increase the public's knowledge of Williamstown's past through educational exhibits, programs, events, research, publications, and any other functions that further this purpose. The Williamstown Historical Museum is committed to collecting and sharing the stories of all of the residents of this area across the centuries.



The Other Side of the Road

by Robert Y. Burns

Cassius Phelps, ca, 1907, standing on the site of the store across from Steele's Corner, currently the site of Bloedel Park. Phelps was the last owner of the store.

When I was a child in the late 1940's and early 1950s the road from Williamstown to South Williamstown, now known as Route 7, was being modernized.

My uncle, Roger Phelps (1916-1982), and my mother Christine Phelps Burns (1915-1997), would

tell stories about when they grew up. First they lived near the Store at Five Corners and later on Linden Street in town.

My mother was born in 1915 to Robert Garfield (1887-1954) and Ethel Smith Phelps (1891-1972) in the small house – she called it “the little house” – across the road from Five Corners.

As I grew up, and my mother's family moved out of the little house, I became aware of stories about this part of South Williamstown. My grandfather took on a job as chauffeur for the Prentice family who were building an experimental farm they called Mount Hope. The center of operations was a large mansion called “Elm Tree House.”

My mother's grandfather, Cassius Daniel Phelps (1852-1925), ran a store located in what is now known as Bloedel Park. There are no visible remains of the store today because it burned down and roads have been widened and paved in the intervening decades. My great grandfather ran the store and post office, which moved across the road into Steele's Store, now known as The Store at Five Corners, after the fire.

I once saw a photograph of my grandfather making deliveries to the South Williamstown area with his horse, Henry, pulling the wagon.

The little house is still there today (47 New Ashford Road); it has been added on to and is occupied). As I grew older, I got to know a man who lived in the little house at the time, Lovell G. Primmer. We never knew his first name, so we just always called him Mr. Primmer.

Mr. Primmer drove a very large and imposing flatbed truck. He raised some vegetables and strawberries. He would come up to town once a week or so and knock on people's doors to see if they wanted to buy his produce. I will always remember those dozen or so boxes of strawberries sitting in the middle of this huge truck bed. Mr. Primmer was used to driving large machinery; from 1904 to 1954 he drove a giant locomotive for the Boston & Maine railroad.

President's Remarks

by Linda Conway

It is a pleasure to be in touch during the early days of spring, when not only the environment but the museum's programming is opening up. After many successful Zoom lectures we were happy to sponsor programs at the Milne Library in March and early April, our first in person in two years. On June 18 we plan to hold our Annual Meeting at the Museum, outdoors if possible. After a short business meeting, our speaker will be Williamstown native John Hanson, author of “Reading the Gravestones of Old New England.” On August 28 Hay Day is on the agenda once again (see page 7 and offer to help out!)

These in-person meetings give us the opportunity to publicize the work of the museum and attract new members. Membership revenue comprises most of our income; another source is donations. In recent months we have received \$700 in gifts in memory of longtime volunteer Edith Schwartz (see our fall 2021 newsletter for a tribute to Edith). Please think about the museum when you are making contributions in honor or in memory of family members or friends.

Continuing to look ahead, as the ground begins to dry out we are working hard to be ready to reconstruct the Dolan-Jenks barn behind the Museum. Permitting is underway and we will keep you posted as activity begins. Donations to the Barn Fund are still encouraged.

Please enjoy this issue of the WHM newsletter. We are happy to feature three articles on our Five Corners neighborhood, in honor of the impending reopening of the The Store. Congratulations to The Store at Five Corners Stewardship Association for bringing that about. Turn also to page 8 to see a credit to former Executive Director Sarah Currie, for whom we have named our Collections Room. The plaque has just been hung.



Mills School | Greylock Institute | Idlewild Hotel

by Cynthia D. Payne

On the northwest corner of Five Corners there used to be a large home belonging to Major Lyman Hubbell. In 1842 Benjamin Franklin Mills bought the building and with the help of his brother, Josiah Alvin Mills, opened a school, using the former home as a student hall. B.F. Mills had attended a private boarding school in Bennington, but had not gone on to college. J.A. Mills was a graduate of Williams College and had become a lawyer in Buffalo NY. B.F.'s son, George F. Mills, later joined them as associate principal of the Mills School and then as principal. B.F. and J.A. were the grandsons of Samuel Mills who came to South Williamstown in 1770.

The Mills School started with just two boarding male students and several coed day students. Although the school began to attract boys from New York City for several years, enrollment stayed around 20 students. By 1845 the enrollment had increased enough to add a dorm for 30 boarding students (all male). Tuition, room, and board was \$75 per term for boys under 14 and \$80 for older boys. An additional \$12.50 per term was charged for higher levels of English, Science, and the Classics. Students could take the English Course, the Science Course, or the Classic Course (Latin, Greek, French). There were two boys per room and several rooms had stoves for which an extra \$6 for wood was charged in the winter.

The school continued to restrict enrollment to 30 boarding students. Students coming up from New York City had to travel many hours to make the 35 mile journey from Albany. In 1859, however, the Troy and Boston Railroad had opened the Williamstown station, reducing the travel time to 1 hour from the station to the school. It



This image from a WHM exhibit featuring “The Golden Age of Postcards, 1900-1915” shows the Idlewild Hotel during that period.

touted its location in a “small and quiet country village” away from “the enticements to dissipation.” It gained a good reputation and attracted students from all over the country. It became a feeder school for Williams College, as well as Ivy League schools.

At 11:30 on a Sunday morning in April of 1872 a fire was discovered in an attic over a classroom by a servant girl. There was a huge turnout to fight the fire, but after two hours the wind changed and blew the fire onto adjoining buildings. Nine of the students lost all their belongings. The loss was calculated at \$150,000. The school had just completed extensive repairs to the buildings. Mills then rebuilt on a larger scale as the Greylock Institute. It could accommodate 100 boarders and included many improvements such as steam heat, running water and gas lighting.

By 1873 the school provided three areas of concentration. The Classical Division provided the students with a liberal arts education in preparation for college. The English Division consisted of penmanship, book-keeping, arithmetic, and business forms. The Science Division offered laboratory experiments in

Chemistry, Natural Philosophy, and Natural History for those who did not wish to go to college and “are not satisfied with those requirements which simply qualify them to commence a business life.” The Classical Division enrolled 40 students (including 3 girls), the English Division had 65 students (4 females), and the Science Division had 7 students. Tuition, room, and board was now \$450 with extra charges for piano lessons (\$60), French (\$40), German (\$40), and laundry (\$0.50 for a dozen pieces).

Mills also ran a 90 acre farm in connection with the school, which provided fresh produce to the school, with the excess being sold. There were baseball, football, and track teams. In 1873 two fraternities or “secret societies” were formed offering boxing, chess, whist, cribbage, bicycling, and lawn tennis.

Because of financial difficulties the school went bankrupt and lamentably closed in 1889. It was then repossessed by the North Adams Savings Bank. The buildings were sold to Williamstown native Henry C. Savage in 1895 and then reopened as the luxurious Idlewild Hotel.

The bedrooms were en suite, many with private baths. There was an elevator to the second and third floors. The recreation hall had a pool table and the dining room had music at lunch and again at dinner along with dancing. Outside were tennis, croquet, golf, and a trout stream. The farm provided milk, cream, butter, eggs, poultry, and fresh vegetables.

Through the late 1890s the *North Adams Transcript* reported that the hotel was a popular site for community group events including the Green River Grange, the Cosmopolitan Club, the Crescent Chess Club, the Hoosac Valley Agricultural Society, the Veterans of the Spanish American War, and the Second Congregational Church.



The elaborate French 2nd Empire building as it appeared as the Greylock Institute, in the early 1900s.

It also hosted the graduations for the Williamstown High School and Williams College. There were banquets, concerts, dancing, sleighing parties, benefits, cake walks, and New Year’s Eve parties. Waubeeka Springs provided the water and a pond provided ice. L.G. Treadway got his start working at the Idlewild. Treadway left the Idlewild in 1912 to manage the Commons at Williams College, and to run its Alumni House, soon renamed the Williams Inn.

The Idlewild Hotel business was declining. Savage sold it to George R. McDonald, but he was unable to make a go

of it. In 1899 George Halfacre bought the horses and livery from the hotel. In 1908, after it had sat empty for a few years, F.N. Emery, the former manager of the Greylock Hotel, and Harry Reinhardt of North Adams, bought it and spent approximately \$5,000 on repairs, renovations and redecorating the 60 rooms. In 1910 Arthur Plumb and George Clark bought the property and ran it as a summer resort for a while, but by 1921 the hotel was empty again. There was talk of its

becoming a hospital for disabled vets with TB, but the plan was abandoned because of strong community opposition.

In 1922 the hotel was sold along with 100 acres of land to a New York group for \$100,000. It was briefly a school and summer camp for Jewish girls and boys, but that also failed and it was closed. In 1927 Mr. and Mrs. W. Garrett Conant of New York City bought the property and did extensive renovations to the hotel including installing modern plumbing. There were accommodations for 125 guests and the dining room seated 150. They held the summer session of their Cambridge tutoring school there and many parents stayed at the hotel. For a time there were dinner dances, afternoon teas, and a French chef, but in 1932 the hotel was finally demolished.

THOUGHTS OF SPRING



*The Grand March at the Gale Hose Company's
annual Easter Monday Ball, c. 1958.*

*The firemen are interspersed with local women and girls —
all dressed for the occasion.*

Mothers' Day Note

Mary Davis Simonds, wife of Benjamin, became the mother of the first Anglo child, Rachel, born in the township on April 8, 1753. Benjamin had been a sentinel at Ft. Massachusetts and one of the first six soldiers from the fort to build 'regulation houses' ("Eighteen feet long, fifteen feet wide and seven feet from floor to ceiling") in West Hoosac Plantation, later known as Williamstown. The Simonds built their home the same year that Rachel was born. In 1762 the Simonds built and operated, on the present site of the Pine Cobble School, Williamstown's first tavern, the place to which the town proprietors would adjourn after town meetings. They moved their tavern to the present site at Route 7 (Simonds Road) and North Hoosac Road where it currently stands. Near the place where Rachel was born, gravestones for the Simonds - Rachel, Benjamin, and Mary, the "First Mother" of Williamstown - still stand in Westlawn Cemetery.*+

Reflections on My Father for Father's Day and Memorial Day by Patrick Quinn

My father, John H. Quinn (Jack), was born in Williamstown in 1920, the survivor of twins. He grew up in town and attended local schools, playing football, delivering papers and catching frogs to sell to a local restaurant to make money during the depression. His father died when he was just ten years old, and as the oldest boy in a family of three children he assumed many responsibilities. Jack went off to school in Boston, returning home after serving an apprenticeship to start his life. Soon after his return to Williamstown the country went to war and Jack enlisted in the Army Air Corps hoping to become a pilot.

Jack was sent to attend Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, for technical training. From there he was sent alone by train to Santa Ana, California, for pilot training. I never knew he had ever been to California until I decided to move there myself. While in California, a cousin of my grandmother's who was married to a lawyer at M.G.M. introduced him to Mae West; he never told me the whole story.

There were too many candidates for pilots at that time so he ended up as a tail gunner. Jack was sent to England where the Americans flew day-time bombing missions over Germany. He was shot down three times; the last time his parachute didn't open up! He was able to tear open the emergency chute with a crash landing in Belgium. He told my grandmother she should sell the house on Glen Street as he didn't expect to survive.

Returning home after the war he married my mother, Lois Boland Quinn, set up his own business, was elected Williamstown Clerk and raised his family of five children (I am the eldest).

My father never spoke much about the war until his later years, and was awarded the Purple Heart fifty years after returning home from the war. One year he was the Marshall of the Williamstown Memorial Day Parade.

He was proud of his children and our accomplishments, as we were of him and his.

HAY DAY FAIR

Hay Day 2022

Please join us on
Sunday, August 28, from 11 to 3
for the following:

Music • Food • Vendors
Children's Games • Silent Auction
...and much more

Hay Day will take place at the museum,
32 New Ashford Road

If you are able to **volunteer**, please leave
a message at **413-458-2160**
or email us at
williamstownhistoricalmuseum.org

HISTORY BOOK CLUB

Thursday, May 12 • 1:00



Via Zoom

We are reading "The Last Castle"
by Denise Kiernan —
the story of the
building of the Biltmore mansion
in Asheville, North Carolina

The WHM Collection

The museum's collection consists of items dating from pre-history in the region through the present day, and the collection is always growing. The museum encourages all residents and museum members to share their stories, make suggestions about areas of research and program presentation, and participate in the museum's activities so a broader understanding of the history of Williamstown can be gained and shared. The museum needs your help to ensure that everyone is represented. Please contribute to the diversity of the collection by sharing your story, your thoughts, and artifacts related to the town's history. Thank you for your investment in your town.

Digital Research Resources Available

Visit the Williamstown Historical Museum to access digital research resources including newspapers.com. Staff and greeters are available to get you started on your research today!

You may also access our collection
online by visiting
williamstownpastperfectonline.com

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Please think of the Williamstown Historical Museum
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Mail to: Williamstown Historical Museum
32 New Ashford Road
Williamstown, MA 01267

ENCLOSED is my contribution for: _____

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www.williamstownhistoricalmuseum.org



Former Executive Director Sarah Currie stands next to the recently mounted plaque naming the museum's Collections Room in her honor. Sarah joined the museum as an assistant in 2011 and was Executive Director from 2013 until July 2021. She remains an enthusiastic member, donor, and informal consultant to the WHM and we cherish her friendship.

Williamstown Historical Museum

THE MUSEUM IS OPEN TO VISITORS!

**2 New Ashford Road
Williamstown, MA 01267**

Friday & Saturday | 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

**The museum is also open
by appointment.**

*Please call or email to make an
appointment to visit or carry on
research outside of our regular hours.*

CONTACT US

Phone | (413) 458-2160

Email | info@williamstownhistoricalmuseum.org

Sources Used

The Five Corners District and Sloan Tavern

All photos are from Williamstown Historical Museum

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Mother's Day Note

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