



# MANSFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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May 2009

Some 220 years ago George Washington traveled down Mansfield's Old Turnpike on his way to Boston. Washington had expressed his gratitude to Connecticut, especially eastern Connecticut, for providing valuable provisions during the Revolutionary War. On a personal level, Washington, had come to stay with and know area residents, including Israel Putnam (of nearby Pomfret), whom he eventually named as one of his Major Generals.

On May 15, Kenneth Ebbitt will bring Putnam to life for us by recounting the various stories that made him one of country's first folk heroes. We hope you will join us for light refreshments, historical intrigue, and surely a few chuckles at this special program. We thank Fred Cazel for organizing the program.

In the meantime, the Museum is coming to life in anticipation of the May 31 opening. Exhibit boards are going up, short histories and vignettes of life in Mansfield are near final, and new photos are being mounted. Soon the Museum will open its doors welcoming the Mansfield community for a new season. We look forward to welcoming you on May 31.

We are grateful to Ann Galonska, Museum Director, the Museum Committee, and interns from the University of Connecticut for planning and preparing the new exhibits. We also want to thank Carolyn Stearns for arranging the opening day programming on "Spinning Tales," which will offer us insight into the oral traditions and how stories were passed from generation to generation. And we are pleased to house an exhibit recognizing the bicentennial of the First Baptist Church's founding and religious life in the early 1800s. We thank Meradith and Bill McMunn and the church's Heritage Committee for arranging this exhibit.

The Historical Society board members look forward to welcoming you to Opening Day and to the museum throughout the summer. The museum will be open every Thursday and Sunday, 1:30 – 4:30 p.m., through the end of September. Isabelle Atwood will be calling members to recruit hosts and hostesses to man the museum on our open days. Please be ready to volunteer (or recommend someone who can help the Museum for an afternoon). Ours is a wonderful museum full of Mansfield's treasures; please help us share it with the public.

*John Meyers, President*

## UPCOMING EVENTS:

**Friday, May 15, 7:30 p.m.: "ISRAEL PUTNAM: A NEW TYPE OF AMERICAN HERO"**  
**First Church of Christ, Congregational in Mansfield Center (Intersection: Routes 195 & 89)**

At our May meeting Kenneth Ebbitt, graduate student in History at the University of Connecticut, will present his recent research on Israel Putnam. Details are on the following page.

**Sunday, May 31, 1:00 - 4:30 p.m.: MUSEUM OPENING**

Storyteller Carolyn Stearns brings her newest program "Spinning Tales" to our stage area. A program of stories all with a spinning wheel in the tale will be performed while she spins and cards wool. Carolyn is the daughter of Jessie Marshall, a local 18th century textile expert. Carolyn learned to spin as a youth and here combines two skills for a show that is sure to set your imagination spinning! Join us opening day as we spin historic tales and traditional folk and fairy tales into a delightful afternoon of listening pleasure for all ages. Stop for a single story while meandering through the exhibits or sit and listen to them all. For more info on Carolyn Stearns see her website at [www.carolynstearnsstoryteller.com](http://www.carolynstearnsstoryteller.com)

## ISRAEL PUTNAM: A NEW TYPE OF AMERICAN HERO

Our May 15th program will feature a presentation on Israel Putnam of Pomfret, Connecticut – farmer, Indian fighter, ardent patriot, and one of George Washington's first Major Generals. Putnam emerged from the Revolutionary War as a new type of hero in an age when deference to leading men of established families and wealth was breaking down. Representing a new model for those who were no longer willing to be bound by old constraints, Putnam was a common man who lived an exciting, decidedly uncommon life.

While George Washington was tall and regal in appearance, Putnam was short and overweight; while Washington seemed unapproachable, Putnam was gregarious, a man you would like to drink a pint with. The press recognized that Putnam resonated with common people and from the end of the Revolution until the beginning of the 20th Century, stories of Putnam's patriotism and heroic deeds (at least 16 different stories) were chronicled in biographies, newspapers, school books, magazines and juvenile books. Putnam became a folk hero, arguably America's first. He was an early version of Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett.

Kenneth Ebbitt, our speaker, will regale us with his research and insights on how Putnam became a national hero rather than simply a Connecticut or New England hero. For over 120 years Putnam anecdotes were presented by the press as examples of American manliness to which boys and men should aspire. Putnam was an important hero who, Mr. Ebbitt will argue, helped shape 19th century male identity.

Mr. Ebbitt has recently completed his course work for a M.A. in History at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. A non-traditional graduate student, he graduated from Georgetown University with a business degree in the 1960s and spent his entire business career in the financial services industry. Four years ago he decided to return to school to pursue his interest in history.

### NEW EXHIBITS WILL OPEN ON MAY 31

Four new exhibits are taking shape with the help of volunteers and our student interns: Stacie Minervino, Amelia Trial and Amanda Sullivan. We

are most appreciative of their hard work and I want to extend a special thanks to all of them!

This year marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Mansfield's First Baptist Church. Members of the Church's Heritage Committee – Meradith and Bill McMunn, Nancy Flynn and Church Historian, Ethel Larkin, have researched and prepared an extensive exhibit chronicling the history of the church. There is a full description of the exhibit in the following article.

Two of the other new exhibits focus on the village of Gurleyville and its namesake – the Gurley family. In its heyday in the mid-1800s, Gurleyville was a thriving community with two silk mills, a gristmill and saw mill, its own church, a school and three stores. The exhibit includes a wide variety of photographs and artifacts related to the village and its industries. It also provides information on two noted men who hailed from Gurleyville: Charles Emory Smith, who was the U.S. minister to Russia from 1890 to 1892 and Postmaster General from 1898 to 1902, and Wilbur L. Cross who served as Governor of Connecticut from 1931 to 1939.



*The silk mill in Gurleyville built by James Royce in 1848 and later operated by his son-in-law, Emory B. Smith, for over 25 years.*

The related display traces the history of the Gurley family in Mansfield. Gurleyville owes its name to Ephraim Gurley who established a successful tool manufactory on the Fenton River in 1808. However the first Gurleys who settled in Mansfield in the early 1700s lived four miles northwest in the area known as "The Ravine." This exhibit will also recognize George H. Gurley whose bequest 30 years ago established our Society's

endowment fund. Rudy Favretti, Fred Cazel and John Meyers have contributed to these exhibits.

This year our kitchen display area focuses on textiles in two time periods, 1800 and 1900. In the earlier kitchen, domestic textile production of wool, linen and silk will be illustrated, including spinning, weaving and the use of natural dyes. The 1900 kitchen will examine the 19<sup>th</sup> century technological changes that relegated the spinning wheel and loom to the attic and led to the development of new textile crafts in the home.

In addition to these new exhibits, we are also reprising the barn exhibit in the Old Town Hall building. Last year our historical society and the Town's Agriculture Committee participated in a statewide barn survey project under the auspices of the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation. Numerous volunteers traversed Mansfield photographing and gathering information about our local barns. We also sponsored a barn photography contest that resulted in many wonderful entries. The exhibit includes selected materials from the barn survey project, the photography contest entries, and historic photographs from our collection. Another of our student interns, Carolyn Barry, has just completed the remainder of the barn survey project and is submitting the information to the Connecticut Trust.

We hope you will attend the museum opening on May 31, 1:00 - 4:30 p.m. In addition to viewing the new exhibits, you can also enjoy some "spinning tales" related by Carol Stearns as she spins and cards wool. We also encourage you to bring your family and friends to visit the museum this summer. Come escape the summer heat while learning more about our town's fascinating history!

*Ann Galonska, Museum Director*

## **FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH 200<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY EXHIBIT**

The First Baptist Church on Spring Hill has been a focal point of religious, cultural, and social life in Mansfield from its beginnings in the late 1700s to the present day. Located across from the Mansfield Historical Society Museum, the Church is celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of its official recognition by the Hartford Baptist Association and the dedication of its first meetinghouse on October 16, 1809.

To mark the anniversary of two centuries of active involvement with the Town and its people, the Church Heritage Committee will sponsor an exhibit of artifacts, documents, and photographs spanning the entire 200 years. In the exhibit, which will open on May 31<sup>st</sup> and run until the Museum closes in September, you will see photographs of Mansfield dairy farmers, tradespeople, judges, authors, politicians, and pastors, who were active in the Church on Spring Hill. The exhibit will document the lives of prominent and ordinary people by telling the stories of their involvement in the Church and the community. For example, a large friendship quilt from the Museum's permanent collection, made by the ladies of the Church, will be the centerpiece of the narrative of quilting and other fundraising crafts carried out by Church members.



*An early picture of the Baptist Church surrounded by tall pine trees with horse stalls just visible at left behind the church.*

The Church was started by a small group of independent-minded farmers, some formerly Separatists, who met in private homes in the 1770s. They were motivated by the same principles that led other Connecticut Baptists to express their concern to President Thomas Jefferson, who wrote to them in 1802 that the Constitution built "a wall of separation between church and state." These early Mansfield Baptists drafted statements of faith, raised money to support a preacher, in 1807 hired a full-time pastor, in 1808 completed their first meetinghouse, and in 1809 were recognized by the Association of Connecticut Baptists. The roll of members of the Baptist Church includes the names

of many prominent citizens, whose descendants live in Mansfield today.

The congregation voted in 1874 to sell the original meetinghouse to Levi Hall, who moved it with oxen down the steep hill to Willimantic, where it was set up on Maple Street. The present Gothic Revival church building, which has been called the most significant architectural structure in the Town of Mansfield, was erected in its place in 1875. In 1895 the Conference Room (social hall) was added, and in 1901 and 1906 interior remodeling made the Church more useful and attractive. In 1965 a large Sunday School wing was added where stalls formerly housed the horses of church-goers, and in 1980 the Conference Room was doubled in size to accommodate larger events.

From its beginnings, the Church has been active in outreach and mission work in the local community and around the world. For example, an early 19<sup>th</sup> century pastor left to become a missionary and founder of churches in Brooklyn, New York, and a current member makes frequent medical missionary trips to Africa and Central and South America. The church has been instrumental in establishing and supporting the Windham Area Interfaith Ministry (WAIM), and members are active in cancer walks, bike rides, fuel bank fundraising, and other non-profit community events.

The Ladies Aid Society has helped the Church with fund-raising throughout its history. Projects of the Ladies Aid have included theatrical and musical performances, public suppers featuring home-baked ham and beans with fresh strawberry shortcake, flea markets, tag sales, teas, and bake sales.

A tradition of determination to pursue its goals has sustained the Church through good and bad times. Church historian, organist, and President of the congregation Ethel Freeman wrote in praise of Church members that “they never shirked a duty nor countenanced anyone else doing so.”

*Bill and Meradith McMunn,  
Heritage Committee, First Baptist Church*

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**MUSEUM OPENING: SUNDAY, May 31, 1:00 – 4:30 p.m.**

**Museum will be open on Thursdays and Sundays, 1:30 – 4:30 p.m., through the end of September**

