

Squire's Tavern Quarterly

Barkhamsted Historical Society Newsletter

web site - barkhamstedhistory.us

December 2023

Merrill Tavern and the Family Behind It

By Mike Day

There's been a lot going on regarding the Merrill Tavern. Behind the scenes, there has been grant writing, architectural research, and speculating as to what the future may hold for this historic old building. But just who was this Merrill, that an historic old tavern should carry his name? Turns out that Merrill was not just one person, but a family of tavern keepers and community leaders who served this town in many ways in the early 19th century.

The first Merrill tavern keeper in this town was John Merrill, who was born in New Hartford in 1762. Around 1787 John and his wife Elizabeth Shepard moved to Barkhamsted and settled basically where our Schoolhouse Museum is today, a bit south of the tavern building. A son, George, was born there in 1788. One early record suggests that John Merrill may have



Merrill Tavern circa 1930 about the time it was acquired by the Metropolitan District Commission water company. Notice Center Church faintly visible in the background at left.

been a blacksmith by trade, but by the spring of 1790 he was apparently also using his house as a tavern. The Historical Society has documents from 1790 through 1810 listing John Merrill as a tavern keeper, but he seems to have retired from that business around 1809. His son George, the one born in Barkhamsted in 1788, seems to have taken over the business, and as of 1810 was licensed as a tavern keeper. Knowing how small family-owned businesses operate, it is probable that there was a gradual transition in management and responsibility from father to son. It is also quite likely that the father, John Merrill, helped out in his son's tavern from time to time, causing some old-timers to confuse which Merrill ran the tavern and when. There is conflicting information regarding these men.

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A Barkhamsted Scene by Vito Covelli

Barkhamsted Historical Society has received another generous donation from the Covelli family recently. Claire Covelli gave us a painting done by her great uncle, Barkhamsted artist Vito Covelli. The painting (shown at right) depicts a person building a small bridge, with his horse and wagon nearby. Claire said this person is George Bsullak, a neighbor and friend of the Covellis. We are not sure when Vito painted this... possibly in the 1940s.

Vito and his family lived on a small farm on East West Hill Road. Claire still occupies the old family home. Vito was a prolific painter, doing 125 landscapes for the Federal Art Project in the 1930s. We are so appreciative of this painting of a Barkhamsted scene by a Barkhamsted artist. Come down and see it on display at Squire's Tavern! ☞



Merrill Tavern and the Family Behind it... Continued from page 1

Early taverns, particularly in rural areas like Barkhamsted, offered a much wider range of services than we usually associate with taverns today. In communities lacking in public buildings such as a town hall, the neighborhood tavern was often the community center where town officials might hold meetings or even hold elections. The tavern would often serve as the local post office and as a courtroom for the local Justice of the Peace.

Barkhamsted did not have an official Town Hall until 1867, so much of the community's activity in those early years must have centered in Merrill Tavern. Because taverns were so central to community life, tavern keepers were usually well-respected citizens and often held public offices. Such was the case with the Merrill Tavern.

When John Merrill retired from tavern keeping, around 1809 or 1810, he started devoting much of his time to public service. In 1811 he was a Selectman and also the Town Clerk. A year later he was elected to the State Legislature, and for several years he held all three posts at the same time. In 1818 when Connecticut debated adopting a new State Constitution, John Merrill was one of our two delegates to the convention. He was active in civic leadership until at least 1824.

But the family business also needed attention. Back in 1813 John Merrill had purchased the 21.5 acre property

next door and quickly sold a part of it to his son George, who proceeded to build a new house there, the one we now know as Merrill Tavern. The Tiffany record says that "George took charge of building the house about 1814."

George had by that time at least two years' experience as a licensed tavern keeper, managing the tavern his father had established. This suggests that George's new building, the one we know as Merrill Tavern, was built with the specific intent of being a tavern. Tradition has it that the building was often referred to as "Merrill's Hotel". Calling it a hotel, as opposed to merely an inn or a tavern, suggests that it offered a higher level of service than a mere tavern would offer.

The location of the building was extremely favorable for this type of business. A road from Granby west through the Hollow and on to Winsted passed by on one side, while a road north from New Hartford to Hartland passed by on another. In later years the new building was known as "Esq. John Merrill's second home" suggesting that at some point John moved from his original house/tavern to the new one built by his son. He is said to have died there in 1848. The property stayed in the Merrill family until 1920. In the 1930s the house and property were acquired by the MDC.

George Merrill was always busy. Around 1818 he built a new home for himself and family just to the east of his new Tavern. George stayed in this new house for just a few years, until 1826, when he appears to have built yet another, grander home. The new house seems to have been designed from the outset as a tavern with a spacious ballroom, numerous rooms and stables. It was strategically located in Barkhamsted Center, right across the street from the church, cemetery and parade ground. At some point after he moved, his old house became the town's Poor House, and George served as overseer of the poor.



Photo above- One of the Merrill Taverns... This one is in Barkhamsted Center down the hill from the current Center Church. This building was moved and is currently occupied by Peter and Peggy Bakker on Boettner Road in Barkhamsted.

Continued on next page

Merrill Tavern and the Family Behind it...Continued from page 2

Throughout the 1820s and 30s, George was purchasing land in the Center Hill area and soon became one of the major land owners in central Barkhamsted. By the time of the 1850 Agricultural Census, his various farms had 44 cows for milking and produced 1,000 pounds of butter and 6,000 pounds of cheese annually, far in excess of anything his neighbors were able to produce. In addition to farming,

and as Judge of Probate. Another of John Merrill's sons, Samuel Merrill, was a licensed tavern keeper for a couple of years in the 1830s, as was a grandson, George Webster Merrill.

George Merrill lived on at the Tavern he had established across from the church until about 1856 when the property was transferred to his son Charles. George moved up the street a short distance to another property he owned where he died in 1865.



Photo above- a George Merrill farmhouse in Barkhamsted Center.

George was a major producer of "potash", an industrial by-product made from wood ash and used as a fertilizer. Clearing the local forests to make way for his farming operations would have provided the needed wood ash.

For several years beginning in 1819, George's younger brother, Merlin, was listed with George as co-licensee at the tavern. And like his father before him, Merlin Merrill served several terms as Town Clerk, as State Representa-

After mid-century the population of Barkhamsted started a steady decline. Industrial development moved towards more urban centers such as Winsted, and improved roads or other public facilities made the traditional rural tavern less of a necessity.

The various Merrill buildings gradually reverted back to being exclusively private homes. Over time, and particularly with the coming of the MDC, the structures themselves were either moved or destroyed. The thriving neighborhood once known as the Hollow gradually disappeared. A few buildings from that time still remain – the Merrill tavern being one of them – which your Historical Society is working to preserve. The Merrill tavern is more than just an old building; it is one of the few vestiges remaining from an important chapter in our town's early history. It is also a monument to a family that played a leading role in town government and culture in the early years of the 19th century. ☿



Looking for a unique place
For your intimate gathering?

SQUIRE'S TAVERN IS THE PLACE !!

Events for up to 50 people
Rental Fee -\$150

FOR RESERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS CALL:

NOREEN WATSON 860 738-1152

Peoples Forest is 99 Years Old

Peoples Forest was dedicated on October 4, 1924. That makes it 99 years old now. Just wait until next year! For the 100th anniversary a big celebration is in the works and Barkhamsted Historical Society is already helping to plan for that event. If you appreciate and enjoy Peoples Forest, please consider a donation to help fund the 2024 event. There's a GoFundMe effort set up now... on that site search for "Peoples State Forest" and you should find the location to donate, hosted by Don Stein.

On October 4, 1924 a big dedication event was held at what is now the Whittemore section of Peoples Forest. Why was it held there? The main area of Peoples, what is now the Matthies area, was not part of the Forest until 1929.

In 1924, the campaign to create Peoples Forest had raised enough funds and the land-buying program had purchased

435 acres which organizers felt was enough to officially launch the new State Forest.

The big day featured an elaborate "pageant" put on by hundreds of actors, young and old. Various dignitaries spoke, including Governor Charles Templeton. Attendance was estimated at between 3,000 and 4,000 people. A newspaper account said, "It was a glorious autumnal day, with the blue sky unmarred by a single cloud, the great luminary sent its golden rays streaming and streaking across the forest, bathing the multicolored foliage in beams of mellowed beauty."

It was a great day and over the years many more acres were added to Peoples, now totaling about 3,059. Peoples is much appreciated for its beauty by residents near and far, and we hope the 100th celebration next year pays tribute to this great resource in our town. ☘

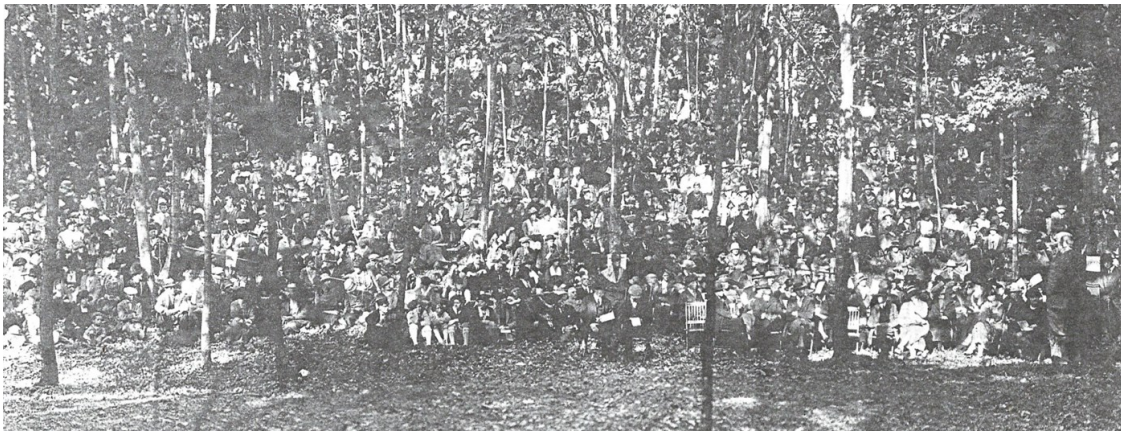


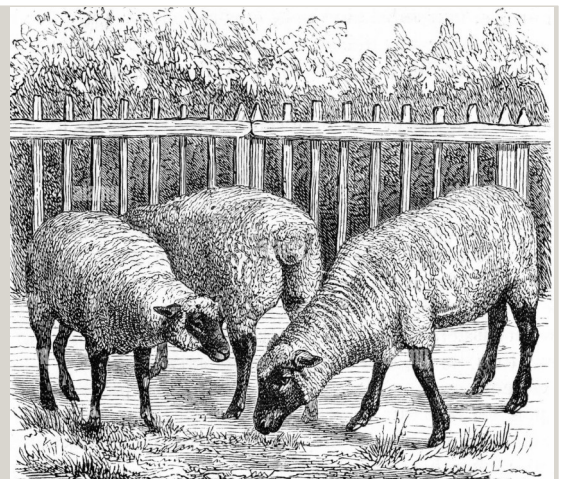
Photo above- a portion of the crowd at the October 4, 1924 dedication of Peoples State Forest.

A blast from the past...

Item from the 1888 Town of Barkhamsted Annual Report:

*July 23 - payment #141 to Edward Wilcox for
sheep killed by dogs.... \$5.00*

Apparently years ago the town was responsible for paying farmers for sheep that were injured or killed by dogs. And Wilcox was not the only one making a claim that year. The total paid out by the town for the 12 month period was \$41.



Historical Society News



Tavern Night at Squire's

Several years ago, our annual Tavern Night event was interrupted by the COVID pandemic but on Saturday evening November 4, 2023, we were back in business. We had a great turnout for old-time tavern food, music and contra dancing (photo at left) in the ballroom. The walls were rocking just like in the old days!

The New Covelli Painting

Georgia Nash and Bonnie Boyle are shown at right hanging our new Vito Covelli painting. The painting was donated to BHS by the Covelli family (see article on page 1). It is a great addition to our display covering this Barkhamsted artist who painted 125 landscapes for the Federal Art project during the Depression.



History Sign on Saville Dam

Visitors at Saville Dam (photo at left) view the BHS interpretive sign we installed in 2019. The sign has history and numerous photos depicting the area before the building of the dam and reservoir.

This sign was a much-needed feature at the dam. It informs visitors of how Barkhamsted was impacted by probably the single biggest historical event in our town.

In a talk with an MDC employee, we commented on our disappointment that more people were not viewing the sign. A few weeks later he sent BHS this photo.



Collection Corner - highlighting some historic items from our archives.

Shown here (at right) is an item from the Historical Society Collection: "Barkhamsted School Exhibition".

We do not have a lot of information on this program. Apparently, a couple of the schools got together and put on a fairly extensive program of music and skits of some kind. At first we thought all of this was music, with the word "MUSIC" heading each section of individual songs.

But upon closer examination some of the sections are broken down into "scenes", for example "1st scene", "2d scene." So this must have been a series of skits with musical selections interspersed between them.

You will notice that this "exhibition" took place over two days - April 9th and 10th, probably performed in full each day. But what YEAR was this held? One clue is the location: "at the old congregational church".

This program must have occurred after the "new" Center Church was built in 1845 (still standing in Barkhamsted Center) and before the "old" church just down the hill was demolished about 1865. So maybe the kids put on this performance about 1850.

There are a lot of names listed here... but notice that many are repeated. There are about 30 individuals involved, so this was probably done by a couple of the 12 school districts at that time... our guess is the Center School and the Center Hill School based on the family names involved. This is an interesting piece of Barkhamsted history. ❧

What a Program!

BARKHAMSTED

SCHOOL EXHIBITION,

AT THE OLD CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,

On **TUESDAY** and **WEDNESDAY** Evenings, April 9th and 10th.

PROGRAMME.

INTRODUCTORY.

MUSIC.

OUR MEETING HOUSE—Lucius Slade.
THE BARBER AND FOP—Carlton Howd, Lemuel Richardson.
PARODY—Merlin E. Merrill.
WIDDER BEDOTT—1st Scene: Harriet E. Giddings, Edwin S. Beecher. 2d Scene: Harriet E. Giddings, Caroline D. Giddings, Marietta Tiffany, Edwin S. Beecher.

MUSIC.

TOWN MEETING—G. A. Stillman, E. Case, L. Richardson, L. Slade, C. Howd, A. Case, Levi D. Tiffany, Calvin Tiffany, Lorrain Giddings, Merlin Merrill, Franklin Hayden, C. Merrill, S. Merrill, H. A. Priest.
DARKNESS—Edwin S. Beecher.
MILITIA PINE—S. Merrill, H. A. Priest.

MUSIC.

SCHOOL COMMITTEE—Helen C. Merrill, Georgiana Howd, Ellen P. Beecher, Harriet E. Giddings, Abigail Burwell, Eliza J. Beecher, Caroline D. Giddings, Jane M. Giddings, Marietta Tiffany.
THE SHOE MAKER—Edwin S. Beecher, Merlin Merrill, Lemuel Coe, Monroe Merrill, C. Merrill, S. Merrill.
CAPT. HARDY AND NATHAN—C. Howd, Milo Case.
SUNSHINE IN A DARK NIGHT—M. Merrill.

MUSIC.

THE LITTLE REBELS—L. Richardson, L. Coe, Henry A. Priest, Arnold Johnson, and others.
SEEING THE ELEPHANT—Shelden Merrill.
PRISONER OF ROCHELLE—Caroline D. Giddings, L. Coe.
THE RAZOR SELLER—Carlton Howd.
THE GRIDIRON—George A. Stillman, Lemuel Richardson, Ansel Case.

MUSIC.

DOINGS IN OUR SCHOOL HOUSE—Jane M. Giddings, Marietta Tiffany, C. Howd, H. A. Priest, C. Merrill, S. Merrill, M. Merrill, Merlin Merrill.
DEAD COW BROOK SCHOOL—Monroe Merrill.
DEACON HOME SPUN—S. Merrill, H. A. Priest, M. Merrill, Charles Merrill.
URSA MAJOR—Edwin Case.
PEDDLING WITHOUT A LICENSE—Merlin Merrill, Shelden Merrill.
DUTY OF LITERARY MEN TO THEIR COUNTRY—Levi D. Tiffany.

MUSIC.

I'LL TRY—Lemuel Richardson, Monroe E. Merrill, and others.
LA FAYETTE—G. A. Stillman.

MUSIC.

VILLAGE SCHOOL—Harriet E. Giddings, Helen C. Merrill, Caroline D. Giddings, Ellen P. Beecher, Eliza J. Beecher, Abigail Burwell, Jane M. Giddings, Georgiana Howd, Adeliza Case, Marietta Tiffany.
A PARODY—Merlin E. Merrill.
RODERICK DHU—Harriet E. Giddings, G. A. Stillman, Edwin Case, and others.

MUSIC.

THE DOCTOR IN SPITE OF HIMSELF—Eliza J. Beecher, C. Howd, L. Slade, Franklin Hayden, Calvin Tiffany, Edwin S. Beecher.
THE DEATH OF ION—Edwin Case, L. Richardson, L. Slade, E. S. Beecher, Charles Merrill, and others.
From the SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL—Eliza J. Beecher, G. A. Stillman.
THE DANDY—Merlin Merrill, S. Merrill.

MUSIC.

THE SUICIDE—G. A. Stillman, E. Case, L. D. Tiffany, L. Slade.
ROBIN ROUGHHEAD—1st Scene: L. Richardson, L. Slade. 2d Scene: G. A. Stillman, L. Slade, J. Howd, and others. 3d Scene: Helen C. Merrill, Ellen P. Beecher, G. A. Stillman. 4th Scene: Ellen P. Beecher, Helen C. Merrill, L. Slade. 5th Scene: G. A. Stillman, L. Slade, E. S. Beecher. 6th Scene: G. A. Stillman, L. Slade, Miss H. C. Merrill, Miss E. P. Merrill, Lemuel Richardson.
FRANKLIN'S VISIT TO EARTH—A. Case.

MUSIC.

THE YANKEE—H. A. Priest.
THE RESCUE; A TRAGICAL SCENE—G. A. Stillman, L. Slade, E. Case, Julius Howd, E. S. Beecher, C. Howd, Calvin Tiffany, L. Coe, George W. Burwell, and others.
WEATHERFORD'S REVENGE—M. Merrill.
WESTERN ORATORY—G. A. Stillman.

MUSIC.

THE VILLAGE LAWYER—Harriet E. Giddings, L. D. Tiffany, L. Coe, E. Monson, E. S. Beecher, L. Richardson and others.
NATIONAL CHARACTER—L. Slade.

MUSIC.

THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN—Harriet Giddings, Caroline Giddings, Marietta Tiffany, Eliza J. Beecher, Helen C. Merrill, Abigail Burwell, Ellen P. Beecher, Adeliza Case, Jane Giddings, Emily Rexford, Almira Tiffany, Georgiana Howd, Martha Richardson.

MUSIC.

TWO OF A TRADE NEVER AGREE—Merlin Merrill, S. Merrill, H. Priest.
DODGING—Abigail Burwell, Georgiana Howd, Edwin Beecher.

MUSIC.

GEORGE A. STILLMAN, MANAGER.

Wells' Steam Press, 26 State street.

Historical Society Calendar



Squire's Tavern is open for our regular hours:

Sundays from 1:00 to 4:00 pm and
Wednesdays from 9:00 am to noon.



Sunday, December 3, 2023

Christmas Open House at Squire's Tavern from 1:00 to 4:00 pm.
Come see the Tavern decked out in old fashioned Christmas decorations, sample some cookies and hot mulled cider and listen to the Greenwoods concert from 2:00 to 3:00 pm.

A Great way to start the Christmas season!



Photo above- the Greenwoods Consort singing group.

Barkhamsted Historical Society

President - Noreen Watson
Vice President - Paul Hart
Secretary - Kristina Napolitano
Treasurer - Ted Bachman

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Grounds Planning - Georgia Nash
Collections - Jim Lussier
Publicity - Ginny Apple
Education & Research - Mike Day
Finance - Ted Bachman
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Exhibits - Bonnie Boyle
Docents - Cathy Connole
Newsletter - Paul Hart

Trustees

Bill Day (1 year more)
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Harriet Winchenbaugh (3 yrs)

Telephone- (860) 738-2456

Mail- P. O. Box 94
Pleasant Valley, CT 06063

E-mail- bhs@barkhamstedhistory.us

Web site- barkhamstedhistory.us

Squire's Tavern is located at 100 East River Road in Barkhamsted, one mile north of the Pleasant Valley bridge.

Squire's Tavern is open to the public on
Wednesdays 9:00 am to noon and
Sundays 1:00 to 4:00 pm

Barkhamsted Historical Society Membership:
Seniors \$12, Individuals \$15, Family \$25

Mail to Sharon Lynes, BHS Membership,
P.O. Box 94, Pleasant Valley, CT 06063

The Barkhamsted Historical Society is dedicated to preserving Barkhamsted history, helping people connect with past traditions and inspiring appreciation for our heritage to enrich lives and strengthen community.

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Barkhamsted Historical Society
P.O. Box 94
Pleasant Valley, CT 06063

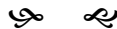
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Newsletter of the Barkhamsted Historical Society



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