Newtown Remembered:

An Oral History

Town Historian Daniel Cruson

Edited by
Andrea Zimmermann
& Mary Maki

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INTRODUCTION

Two years ago, I visited my friend Dan Cruson in his office at Edmond Town Hall and told him there was one very important person we had neglected to interview for the Newtown Oral History Project. Ten years ago we had decided we were finished with that endeavor, but I explained the oversight of this one person had recently come to my attention, and I was keen on doing the interview.

Dan leaned forward at his desk and his eyes lit up—the hallmark of his insatiable curiosity and eagerness.

I told him I had contacted our project colleague Mary Maki and that she was willing to transcribe the interview and create an index, just as she had done with all of our other interviews. I said we couldn't do this without him, however, and was he game?

"Yes! Yes!" Dan said. He was like a kid who was about to burst with excitement. "Who *is* it?"

I smiled and sat back. "It's you, Dan."

Because of Dan's experience as a historian and his extensive knowledge of Newtown's history, we conducted three interview sessions in March of 2018. Unlike the continuous narratives presented in the other oral histories, we chose to leave in the questions I posed. Photographs to illustrate this oral history were kindly provided by local professionals and *The Newtown Bee.* An impressive and full bibliography of Dan Cruson's work appears at the end.

As I reviewed the other oral histories, I had the startling realization that this project had its genesis more than 21 years ago. Mary, Dan and I worked together to produce three volumes: *Newtown Remembered: An oral history of the 20th century* (v.1); *Newtown Remembered: More stories of the 20th century* (v.2); *Newtown Remembered: Continuing stories of the 20th century* (v.3). The volumes, which also include bicentennial interviews and a few features I had written as a reporter for *The Newtown Bee*, present thirty-six interviews.

Each volume took a few years to complete. Our process was thus: we identified prospective subjects and prioritized the list; I researched the subjects, developed questions, and was responsible for interviewing; Mary transcribed the recorded interviews; I edited them for narrative flow; Mary made changes and indexed the volume; and Dan researched and wrote footnotes. We scanned photographs and wrote short bios to introduce each subject.

Herein is the fourth—and final—volume of the Newtown Oral History Project.

I find it fitting that Dan's oral history stands alone. Through it we learn about the ever-changing nature of a community, the benefits of understanding the town in which we live, and, of course, the great value of history and the historian.

Andrea Zimmermann
Newtown, CT
October 2019

Biography

Daniel Cruson is an educator, town historian for Newtown, author, and speaker. He is active in a number of organizations dedicated to the research and preservation of local history. He has been a member of the historical society in Newtown for 48 years, having served as its president for five years in the early 1990s. He was also a charter member of the Easton Historical Society and served a number of years on its board of trustees as vice-president. In addition, Dan is active with the Heritage Preservation Trust of Newtown, Society of American Archeology, and the Archaeological Society of Connecticut where he served as president. In 2005, he served as the chairman of the Newtown Tercentennial Commission.

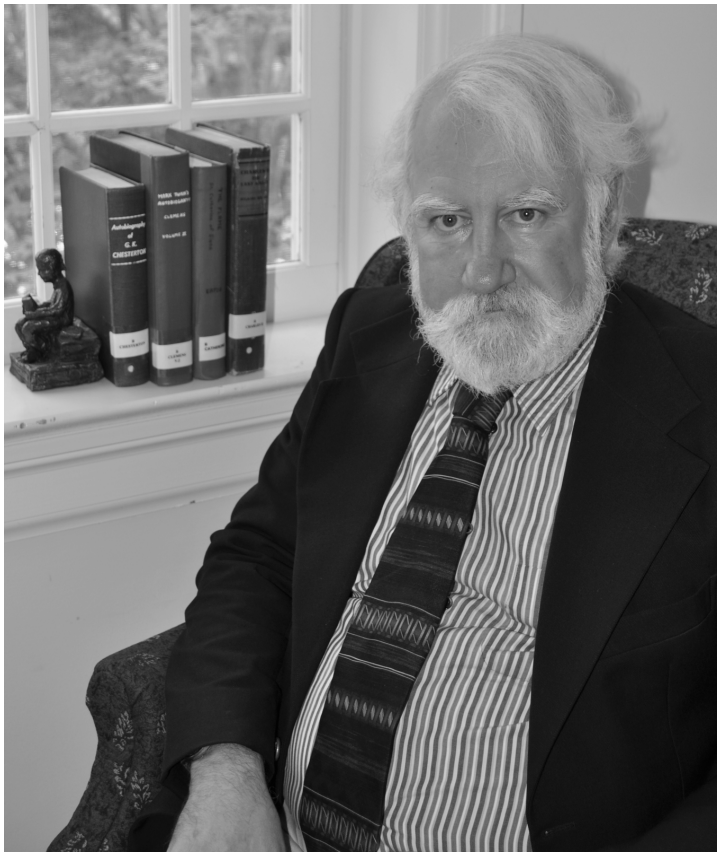
Dan is a retired high school teacher who designed and taught courses in anthropology and local history. His abiding interest in these fields has led him to do extensive research and writing on the history of the towns of central Fairfield County, including Easton, Redding and Newtown, as well as conducting several archaeological investigations in these towns in an attempt to learn more about the lifestyles of their past citizens, both historic and prehistoric. His attempts to acquire more information about the early history and culture of this area has also led him to investigate deeply the subjects of rural slavery, vintage photography, early Connecticut architecture, colonial and post-colonial road building and early cemeteries and their grave markers.

In a continuing attempt to disseminate information on the early history and culture of central Fairfield County, Dan Cruson has lectured and conducted adult seminars. He has published 140 essays in *The Rooster's Crow,* the Newtown Historical Society's newsletter, and 15 books and 8 monographs. A full bibliography appears at the end of this oral history.

(Updated and adapted from *About the Author* in Dan Cruson's 2011 book, *Putnam's Revolutionary War Winter Encampment)*

Daniel Cruson

Throughout his life, Dan has researched and documented people and events in Connecticut's history, particularly those of Newtown. He has shared his tremendous enthusiasm for local history with his students and townspeople, alike, and encouraged them to discover their personal connections to history, and thereby lead a more satisfying life engaged in their communities.



"[A] person who has indulged in local history and has read through some of the sketches and has come to some understanding of where the town came from, is in a position to not only adapt to it better…but also enjoy the town more."

(photo courtesy: *The Newtown Bee*)

~ The Value of History, and What It Means to Be Town Historian ~

Can I start with a quote? Cicero. "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to live the life of a child forever." It sums up nicely, not the fact that we are doomed to repeat it, to paraphrase, or change, but what it champions is this idea that you, by living the life of a child forever, never grow up. A child has no experience in the world. Everything he sees is new to him. It is new and it is wondrous, because he has never come in contact with it before. He is basically naïve, and it is a delightful thing to see in a child.

But there is a downside of it, too, because everything, no matter how disagreeable, is always treated as a crisis. And so he bounces from one crisis to the next.

You can see this in modern politics today. These are people who have not learned from history. They don't realize that all the things they are doing now and talking about have all occurred before. And there are guidelines in that as to how to deal with them today.

So the problem with people who don't learn their history is that they remain naïve and they dodge from one crisis to the next. The value of history is it teaches you that this is nothing new. It has happened for the past 2,000 years, off and on again. And from that you learn how to cope with the modern day. The biggest value of history is you lead a less anxious life as an adult.

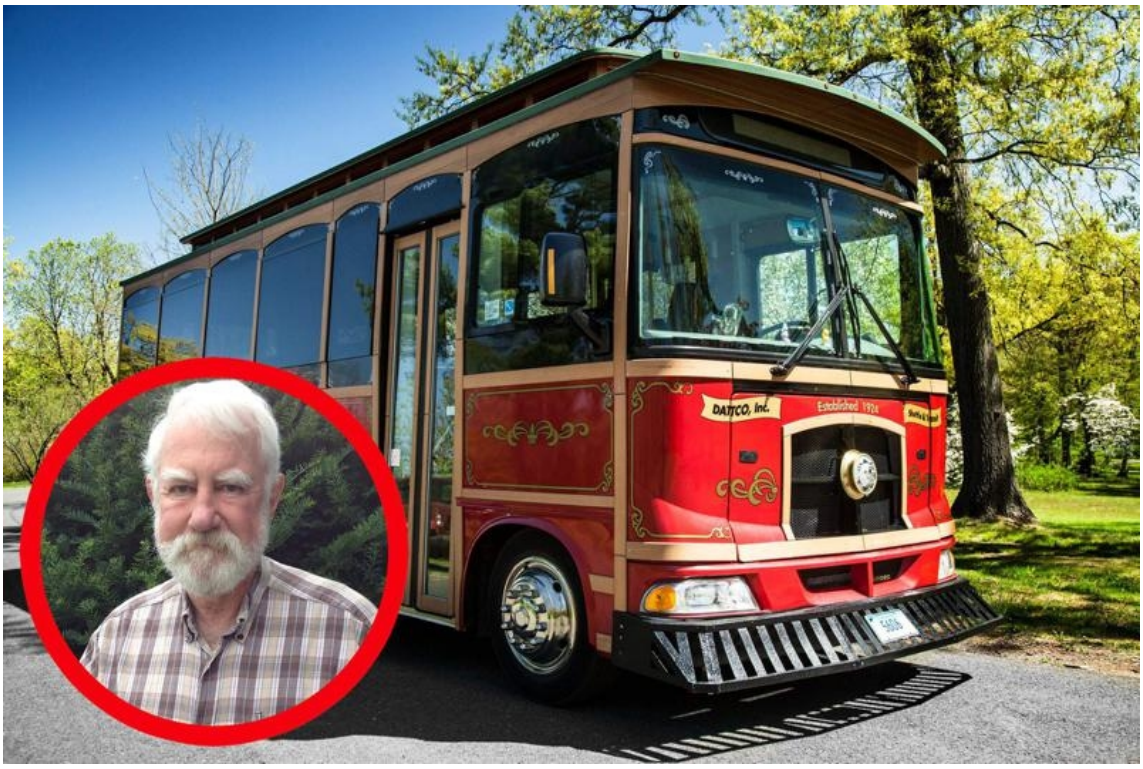
[Interviewer Andrea Zimmermann's voice appears in italics.] There is an article that Curtiss Clark, editor of The Bee*, did in July 29, 1994, and in it you are quoted as saying, "You can't really understand the Town of Newtown or the world, for that matter, unless you understand where it came from."*

This is an extension of what I just mentioned in regard to being naïve. Without that basis of understanding, you coming to the town and town problems, town issues, as something that is relatively new, crisis tinged, highly hysteric, and the reason is because you don't realize that we have done this before. We can do it again. And that is the most important value of history.

Now, there is a secondary value of history, too. Besides the fact it is just a lot of fun, and I mean that is probably the most compelling reason to get into it. It is also mildly addictive. Once you get started you will be going on for the rest of your life. But the other value of history is the fact that it shows this connection between people and places and things. You come to a deeper understanding of what a place like Newtown is, where it came from, why it exists the way it does today. And it means you are less critical of the town than the person who just moves in and has no understanding of where we came from. So that depth of understanding of the town is equally as important as losing the naïveté that you have with no knowledge of history.

Do you think that helps people find out, or realize their place in the world and the town and in whatever context you are talking about?

Yes it does. The fact that a person who has indulged in local history and has read through some of the sketches and has come to some understanding of where the town came from is in a position to not only adapt to it better, which is what I just suggested, but also enjoy the town more, because they know why people do the things the way they do here. And why they tend to do things in the town government the way they do. So yes, there is a great deal of utility for people who are just coming into the town.



Dan is often town tour guide for events sponsored by local organizations. He brings his vast knowledge of the community and story-telling ability to the job. (Photo courtesy: *The Newtown Bee*)

Maybe you could explain what the role of a historian is, and in particular, we are talking about town historian.

The value of a historian—about fifty-five cents and a cup of coffee. Basically what I do as the town historian here is to serve as a lightning rod for information and for bits of the town's past, the artifacts that have survived—the ephemera that has survived. To serve as a place where that stuff can come and be curated and saved and preserved. The fact is that I'm a lightning rod. When people pick up something that has to do with the history when they are cleaning out grandma's attic and trying to figure out what to do with some of this stuff. They don't want it, but it is too valuable to throw away. They immediately think "town historian." That means I get a lot of stuff that I can't use, but—and I have always made this clear to the people who give this to me—the stuff that I can use I will. And that means this stuff comes to me, so I am constantly making discoveries based on the material that people are bringing to me. The other great function of a town historian is researching the town's past and uncovering the little things that have been forgotten or not well-known—I'll give you an example in a minute. And a lot of that comes from things that people give to me here to be saved in the office. I'm unusual amongst town historians in that I do have an office and a vault that goes along with it. [This was before I was moved out of the Edmond Town hall in 2018]

In terms of preservation of the town, I was also officially part of the Tercentennial Committee when that was being formed. In fact, I was the one that ended as Chairman, primarily because I knew what the town's history was and was in a position to bring people together who would be instrumental and helpful in the celebration of our three hundredth anniversary. And so there are official tasks like that that come to mind.

I am also forever handling queries on the town's past, but also and especially, on people. Genealogy has become a real craze over the past several decades, and people are clambering now; [those] in their late middle age and early old age have become [especially] interested in trying to find who their family was and where they were located. This is one of the major reasons why the genetic companies, the companies who will trace your gene background to find out where your origins are, have made out so well and are being so widely used. People are fascinated by this and the fact that they are beginning to find ancestors or ancestral connections through DNA that they normally would not have had any contact with because they had no documentation for it. So the DNA research has been very exciting, and of course, it has been widely advertised from a couple of main companies that do that sort of thing. People are always surprised to find that they are related to half the population of the world. I haven't done it myself, because I know where all my ancestors came from, or almost all of them, but I probably have three quarters Eskimo blood in me somewhere. [Laughter] I haven't done the genetic test.

In terms of other things that the town historian does, as I said, fielding queries is another big one. [That includes] people who call from out of town [who] found some hint that one of their relatives or one of their ancestors had lived here in Newtown at some time in the past, and they want to know 1) if it is true, and 2) who they were. Was there anything special about them? And is there any family wealth still sticking around in town that they might be heir to. I mean you get all kinds of variations of those questions. But that's another thing that a town historian is likely involved with.

House histories are another thing. *What was the origin of my house*? And we've done a lot of work in terms of researching that so that we have a database and it is available for people that gives some idea of when the house may have been built or who may have built it. How long ago. Any of those facts people find interesting. And also, we've put together a manual of house searching and that is primarily so that I can get people started, saying, "Okay, this is what we have recorded for the town, but why don't you go research it," warning them ahead of time that it is addictive and that fact is that they are going to look at this not as a short term project, but it is going to be a major hobby and they are going to spend the rest of their life doing it. And they do. And I sit back as a resource if they run into trouble with the land records or some other records with the town. Then I can come up and give them a hand interpreting what they are finding and suggest a further path they can go. But the house research is an important part of all of this.

And toward that end, Land Use head George Benson has been fantastic and [has] made money available to us to actually do a survey of all of the town's older houses, early 19th century, late 18th century. And we did this back in 2009.

We came up with a list of all the older houses in town that could be used as a reference for them when people come in and want to know if they can change the house or what type of changes they want to make. Can they destroy a particular house or is it historically significant? They can refer to this database to do that. That's part of what the town historian does, to come up with databases of information that will satisfy people's curiosity and to answer the queries that come through.

Is it part of the responsibility of any historian, town or otherwise, to challenge or confirm popular concepts of history?

I don't think it is the duty, and I say this for one reason. It may be you are challenging something that is really well known and is established, and there is no reason to change it, because it is right. It's true. This is the problem with the reconstructionist histories that were being done twenty, thirty, forty years ago. The fact that they would come in and challenge some truth, not have much evidence to the contrary, but then try to change that. If it had happened and the incident was the way it was, no. You shouldn't come in and try to change that understanding unless you have some evidence that we were wrong in the past. So, no. Challenging just for challenging sake is mindless.

When you have come across folklore that people believed as fact, are you impelled to write an essay?

Yes. This deserves some slightly extended treatment. Because the place of folklore in local history is very important. Because the folklore tells us something about the way we think of the past, the way we would like to think things occurred. Very often, as I said, it is wish fulfillment. But the fact remains that folklore, as such, is an important part of the oral history. The fact that the folklore might not be correct is the job of the historian to come back and say, look, this is what really happened. Don't lose the folklore. I've got a long database of folk memories that have occurred that are important to understand how the town thought of itself in the past. But to at least put a historical note to say, okay that may have been what people wished to have happened, but here is how it actually did. Let me give an example.

Widespread mythology was the Chanticleer, the weathervane on top of the meeting house has bullet holes in it. We know that and, of course, the folklore was always that when the French came through under Rochambeau in 1781 to help us end the Revolutionary War, and they came by the Meeting House, they took shots at the weathervane and put bullet holes in it. The belief that this was true, that the French had done this was so deeply entrenched that when they were regilding the weathervane back in the 1930s, the guy who was doing it said, "Oh, we can plug up all these holes and make it look new again." As soon as people saw this, they forced him back up to take it down and knock the solder out, because those bullet holes were an important part of our history. Well the fact is, no, it was probably not done by the French. This was a disciplined professional army and a disciplined professional army does not go around discharging firearms in a country that they

are going through, especially if there is a possibility you are going through enemy territory. And George Washington wrote to Rochambeau and warned him about Newtown, that there was a strong Tory contingent here and there was. They were going to be very hard on any soldier that took a shot that wasn't absolutely necessary, or that wasn't commanded. This is supposition, but more likely is the fact that you had a couple of kids who were going out shooting squirrel with their squirrel guns and walked by the Meeting House and one turned to the other with a challenge and said, "I bet you can't hit the rooster." "Oh yeah? Watch this." Bang. We have French bullet holes in our weathervane.

Again, this is a situation of folklore that is delightful. Don't lose it, but the fact is that you also should have a corrective statement next to this and say, "This is what happened…"

Another good example—and I can refer to this again later when we start talking about how I got involved in all this—was the Mary Hawley case. One of the stories that I have become familiar with when I first came to town back in 1970 was the tragedy of Mary Hawley. In a nutshell, she was a young woman, well, she was twenty-seven, but that was considered old back in the 1880s when this all occurred. She was a member of the Trinity Episcopal Church at that point, and there was an interim minister that had been there, and they had a deep affection for each other. As a result, they ended up getting married in a very small wedding down on Wall Street with [only] her parents there. They were married in a side chapel. Followed by a honeymoon in Europe. They went to Europe and then something very mysterious happened. Shrouded in fog is this story that she was abandoned, or something had happened over there. She became quite sick. Her parents embarked from New York and went to Italy—we later found out it was Florence—and brought her home under mysterious circumstances. And they never talked again about the marriage.

This has fascinated people in town and it generated stories, many of which I will not repeat because they are simply scurrilous. This is not folklore as far as that's concerned. It was just an idol mind making a real scandal where there probably wasn't one. The question was: What did happen?

Well, the break came when I started playing around with early Newtown history. What I found in *The Newtown Bee*, was in 1900, after Marcus Hawley, Mary Hawley's father, died, that she filed for divorce. And nobody had talked about the fact that there had been a divorce. It had been presumed that they had remained married until one or both of them died and then it was a moot point.

In that, the question was if I could find the [court] transcripts, there probably was an explanation of what happened to her and what happened to the marriage. So I started in a logical place, down in Bridgeport where they have the morgue for the *Bridgeport Herald*, a real scandal sheet. They would handle any scandal in the county. Well now you have Mary Hawley. She's probably one of the wealthiest heirs in the county. Marcus Hawley was one of the richest men in town. He had made his money in the gold fields, supplying hardware to the gold miners up there (in California,) and with that he managed to invest in a small struggling little enterprise called "the railroad" and as a result became very wealthy.

After he dies, her mother, Sarah, must have sat her down and said, look, you've got to go through the divorce as painful as it may be, because otherwise if you die, he inherits your entire fortune. So that is why the proceedings, I think, probably occurred. At any rate, the big mystery was: Could we find what happened to the marriage?

Interestingly enough, about this same time I had a friend who was a librarian down at the law library in Bridgeport and he went down to check for the case, because it should have been on file there. There was no file, but there had been one. There was a gap in the files that were down there, and there was an index card saying Crockett versus Crockett, which was the case, and it was missing. Apparently, Marcus had gone to friends down there and they removed the court record. That is why I went to the *Bridgeport Herald*. Essentially she was the wealthiest person in Newtown, and in the area of Fairfield County. It was going to be front-page news in the Herald.

Of course I knew about when she filed, because I had seen that chance article, that small article in *The Newtown Bee*. I went back to the Herald and sure enough, they mentioned the fact that they had filed for divorce. Now, since that was a weekly paper, it meant that I had to go through the front pages—I was sure the divorce would occur on the front page—until I found it. Well, for the next couple of hours I sat and went through every front page, which introduced me to every scandal in Fairfield County that I never wanted to know anything about. And I was about ready to give up. I had gone a full year. I was now back in December of the next year, January of the next year, when just before I was ready to rewind the microfilm, the next issue came up and that was the one with the divorce. And yes, they had reporters there, more than one, reporting verbatim what some of the testimony was and what the details were. I wanted to check this, because it is a scandal sheet; I wanted to check this against a legitimate paper. Well, the *Bridgeport Evening Standard* was the major paper at that time—legitimate paper—in Bridgeport. Now that I had the date when the trial was going on, I could go to that and get a straight story. Again, I was getting quotes, some of which were fairly similar to the Herald, a lot of which were not. And a lot of idle speculation, but the fact was, I had a fairly reliable source.

Now, at the same time I was working with artifacts down in the Cyrenius H. Booth Library. A lot of this were papers of Mary Hawley's that had been deposited there as a result of her having built the library for the town. One of the things that I had managed to find there was a Carte de Visite. This is small, kind of like a greeting card. It is about two inches by three and a half inches. And on it was a roundel, a round oval plate with an early picture of Mary Hawley, about age twenty-seven. What intrigued me was on the back. It was done by a photographer in Florence, Italy, so it had to have been done during their honeymoon. In the process of looking very carefully at it, I realized that it had actually been cut in half. Apparently there had been two roundels, one with her portrait and one with his portrait. His portrait was missing. I'm sorry she did that. We have no photographic record of what he looked like.

His full name was John Addison Crockett, and he was the relief minister. He had come in to cover for the regular minister who was on sabbatical in Europe. So,

as a result, through piecing all this together, I managed to get the complete story, or relatively complete story. There are a few gaps in it, which were filled in later. But the fact was we had a place to start. And this was one of the greatest feelings in the world coming back out of the archives. We'd found the answer to the question people had been asking for countless years, and especially after her death. And I found the answer to it. This resulted in a pamphlet in which I explain most of my findings on what we found, and some of my drawing lines between points to fill in the picture. And I also lectured on it for the Historical Society. It gave me a chance to preserve what we managed to find.

But that is one of the other things that we deal with, the folklore, the speculation, the pseudo history had been kicking around for a long time and this gave me a chance to do a corrective there. I still have notes on what some of the speculation was regarding her marriage, and that I preserve as well. But I also concentrate on the fact that, okay, but this is what really happened. Or to the best of our knowledge.

You mentioned when we spoke briefly before about the value of the historian writing things down—writing books, writing essays—and how important that is.

This is something that came to me during my early experiences in archeology. One of the things that I took as a tenet of what you do as an archeologist historian or anybody that deals with the past, you have an obligation to write this down, to make it available to other people. And the reason in archeology is quite simple: Once you dig through a particular site, you've destroyed the site. And you can never go back and replace it the way it was before you started digging. If you don't record carefully what you've found, as you find it, it is lost information. And that is just desecration. That, in and of itself, is vandalism—historic vandalism of the worst type. Just to have a bunch of arrowheads that were found in a field somewhere doesn't tell you a hell of a lot about the people who were living there. Carefully archeology can.

So it is an article of faith with me that always in the cases of archeology, but even in the cases of history, I document what I found, for example, the information on Mary Hawley. I now had an obligation to put it out there as a corrective, and simply say, this is what really happened to her, to preserve what I had found. If I hadn't published, if I hadn't written that pamphlet, that information would just be lost. Maybe somebody would do it again in the future; with some people's attitude towards history, I despair of that ever occurring. But the fact remains that it is important that I take the results of the research, regardless of what area it is in Newtown's history, and write it up. There was an essay for the *Rooster's Crow*, which is the newsletter of the historical society. Or in lecturing, which I do all over the county and all over the state, is to make that information available. And that is why I have also done several of the biographical monographs of the people in town. Mary Hawley, yes, but also Judge William Edmond. So, again, that's what compelled me to write as much as I have. It wasn't just for the entertainment of people necessarily, although it is for that as well. But it is primarily to make sure the

information has been written down and has been made available for future generations.

One thing I noticed is that you are not just talking about presenting the facts. Especially in the case of Mary Hawley, I feel you view her as a very sympathetic person in our town's history. So rather than just present the data, you seem to try to put people, and homes, and artifacts into some kind of bigger context. To make them real for us. How important is that instead of just presenting the date.

You are presenting the data, too, but there is no reason why it can't be entertaining in the process of presenting it. This forms a story that has interconnected parts. After I had done the Mary Hawley pamphlet, that brought people out of the woodwork who had information or stories about her, or pointed me in other directions. So the mere fact that I had published that and published it as a story, people were interested enough to read it. If it was just a list of dull facts, the heck with it. Nobody would have paid any attention to it. To tell the story is also a good part of it. That means you construct it as any mystery writer will construct a plot, dealing with the basic facts and what this logically leads to, and a certain amount of speculation of what we don't know. We can't document it completely, but we can tell that something must have happened and make some suggestions or some guesses in terms of what that may have been. So, yes, the writing itself doesn't have to be dull. It is not just a list of artifacts. I've done a list of artifacts, too. That's important, but the fact remains is what is the story that those artifacts tell us about what happened at a given point of time in the past? Or about the people who made the artifacts, or whatever? That story is also important and goes beyond the simple list with a certain amount of interpretation.

The story, too, I think, would relate to interconnectedness of people, history and things. So that allows you to branch out a little bit.

One of the most important things I'm beginning to discover as I've been doing this now for some time, is the fact that the more I uncover, the more connections I make to things that I had never thought would be connected. So what happens is, as I make a discovery that often leads to another discovery, and then to another discovery. I find now in writing an essay for the *Rooster's Crow*, I spend more time putting down references, not footnotes necessarily, but references where people can go get the sidebars, the stories that go along or are related to things that have occurred here. And, that just shows I'm finding an interconnectedness. Virtually everything that happened here in the past it is all interrelated. And that's especially true as I start finding people.

I just did some work on the house of Ezra Johnson down in the South Center District. We had some evidence that he rebuilt the house down there; I had a lot of detailed information. As I was looking through this, I kept finding the name Otis Marshall cropping up again and again. Well, I knew that he was a house builder here in town and was responsible for some of the more stately houses in town, including one directly across from the Town Hall, The Glover house, which he was

the architect for. So, that connection was made because I had already done a great deal with master builders in town, knew who many of them were during the Late Victorian era, and it just plugged right in with the work I was doing with Ezra Johnson. So that type of connection is typical of what I deal with on a daily basis.

Would that also tell you that Ezra Johnson had a certain status to have an architect of that renown build his house?

We had the data. We had his account book in which he kept track of all the expenses and people who he had hired to come work on the house and rebuild it. And it was an extensive rebuilding. It was the first house that had plumbing in it, for example, which was done in 1876. Right down to the bottom line I found out that the entire renovation and adding a back addition to that thing cost about $4,100. Now that doesn't sound like a great deal, except [at the time] you could buy a small farm with fifty acres of land, a two-story farmhouse and all the outbuildings for less than $4,000. So, to put it into perspective, all of that data started to show me what his status was in town. He was a very prominent farmer and from other information that I had on the school systems, I know he was heavily involved in the school districts and was a major factor in developing the old district school system here in Newtown. So, yes, one thing leads to another.

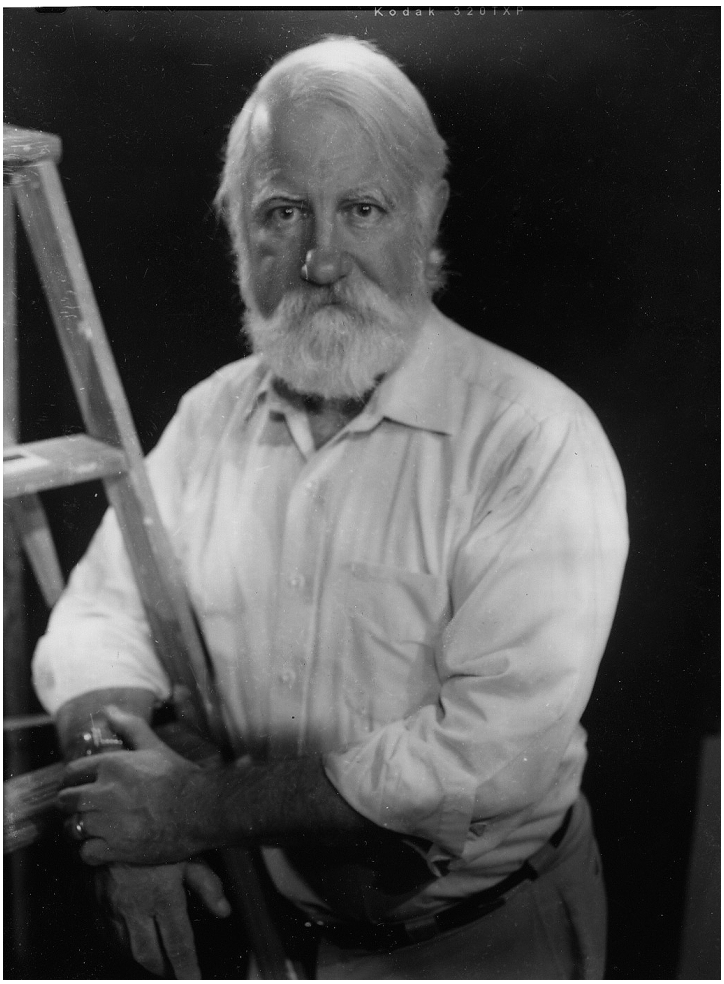
What does it mean to be the official town historian versus unofficial?

They don't have to pay you. [Laughter] The town historian in Connecticut is relatively new in the fact that the enabling legislation was passed back in the early 90s, that basically said that a town could put provisions in its charter, or whatever, to create the position of the town historian, which would be an appointed position, and they suggested through the Selectmen, but it didn't have to be. But it would be an appointed position and one that would then serve very vague purposes. But you could create the official position. And that's what happened. Essentially most of the towns, including Newtown, added that to the charter as a provision, so that by 1994 we had the position of an official town historian. Now before that, the town historian was always the guy who knew more about the history than anybody else, so you went to him to get answers to your questions.

For example, down in Easton, when I was growing up down there, everybody knew that Francis Mellon was the town historian. First of all, he lived through a good deal of Easton's history. His father had lived through even more and they all collected ephemera and material that related to its town history. So these guys served a very valuable purpose. And women served a valuable function within the town and they were the ones that kept the history alive. What the State did in the early 90s by creating official positions, was to say: Okay, now we are identifying somebody formally that has that capability and can act as a lightning rod for the town's history, as I indicated before. But it now became formal. What did it do for me personally? It meant that I could go to the selectmen and have them give me stationery, for example, and business cards. Not much beyond that, but that's

helpful. So that is basically, in a material sense, what I got out of taking on the position in 1994.

As I said, that changed the complexion, slightly. Today we have the professional historians from many towns, who have been made formal. But there are still a lot of towns [with] people who are still acting unofficially. For example, over in Redding, when I taught in the Easton-Redding school district, I instituted a course in local history in my second year there. I obviously had a fair amount of knowledge of Easton and Redding where the kids came from, and was able to weave this in to a course. I became the person who people would call from Easton, for example, when they wanted an answer to a question. And so I became the unofficial historian of Easton.



[Photo credit: Don Brooks]

Although there are two official historians in Redding, again, I am the unofficial person who people come to. So it is a degree rather than anything else. It doesn't make a great deal of difference.

Prior to the state designating that position for communities, did the unofficial historians necessarily write? Or did some of them just collect ephemera and maybe some stories, but not actually do research and generate original material?

Most of our early unofficial town historians were just resource people. They were people that you could come to. You had a local newspaper, and very often reporters would call looking for background information. They still do that today, even with an official position here.

However, many of them did have talents, and actually had written some of this down. For example in Newtown, our "unofficial historian" of a previous era was Ezra Johnson. Ezra Johnson was close friends with the editors of *The Bee*, and as a result ended up doing papers as a result of his research, which they published in *The Bee*. Very often on the front page. So, yes, he was a gifted writer and did that.

Howard Peck in New Milford did the same thing. And he would do essays for the local paper. And after he died, the historical society [there] collected most of those together in a book called *Howard Peck's New Milford*, which again were his memoirs and reminiscences and parts were results of research he had done that went beyond that.

That was one of the reasons why some of the historians and some of the town histories have been written and fairly well written. But it is also the reason why some of us haven't. Very often the town historian feels that he is not a writer and shouldn't do it. In some cases other people will come in and work with them and develop that. In some cases it just doesn't get done, so the town doesn't have a deep recorded history.

One of the things that's changed this for most of us has been the Arcadia Publishing Company. Arcadia was started in Britain where they do a lot more with local and regional histories than we do over here, and they always have. It started publishing low-demand pictorial history books for a particular town. For example, we did several for Newtown. What they would do is collect old photographs with informative captions under them. These were put in roughly chronological order and also occasionally by topic. And this meant that this material would be gotten out in the communities in an inexpensive edition. This became extremely popular, especially over the past fifteen to twenty years. So many of the towns, and official town historians can handle that, because the publishing company takes you step-by-step through the publication process. You are producing captions and not full-blown essays. The information is getting out there. The book is preserving the photographic record, and as I said, the company has expanded dramatically and there are not many communities now in Connecticut and across the United States that don't have at least one of these publications.

The History Press was the same thing only they were more text oriented, and would tend to pick up the stories of the past. That is why I published through them when we did the results of Putnam Park, the archeology and history research over there.

And now those two companies have merged.

They merged. It was a reasonable merger. It made a lot of sense.

Can you tell me a little bit about Ezra Johnson?

Yes. Do you have two years?

[Laughter]

Johnson was an interesting character. He was a very prominent farmer. The family dominated the South Center section of town. The family had a mill down there, so they also served the community that way. Ezra Johnson got very interested in education. They were widely connected with the Medina Academy, in New York, near Buffalo. In fact, they were members of the Merritt family who were

also related to the Johnson family that had moved up to Medina. So we have very close connections and there was constant communication back and forth between the members of the families there and down here. He actually took courses [in education] up at the Medina Academy, so he had formal work at being a teacher. He came back to Newtown and started by teaching first in Sandy Hook and then in the South Center District. The South Center schoolhouse was directly north of his home, so it was very convenient. But as time went on, he spent less time teaching and more time supervising. He became part of the School Visitors here in Newtown, and as a result, he would, and we have some of his accounts, would visit the schools, quiz the teachers, look at the registers, and that sort of thing. That would be their evaluation and would decide whether they would be rehired as a teacher in that district. So he became one of the major characters in Newtown's educational structure. And had a profound effect on it for well over fifty years. He was one of the longest-serving members of the School of Visitors, which was the Board of Education back then.

Now, in addition to this, he developed a passion for history at an older age, and especially as the town started moving towards the bicentennial in 1905. He was on the bicentennial committee, similar to what I was for the tercentennial committee one hundred years later. As a result he agreed to do the historic overview, or historic oration, during that week that most of the events occurred for the bicentennial. He put together various aspects of the town's history that he considered to be important. He delivered that as an oration, but back then it was nothing to sit through two or three hours' worth of lecture. It was still closer to the Puritan heritage. When he finished, people would come up to him and say, you know, we heard the lecture, but there is so much that we would like to go back over it again. We would like to go back and be able to reread it. And it wasn't written down. There were just notes. And so he agreed to turn out a more complete history, which he did. I think it was about one hundred and forty pages. It was published as a bicentennial souvenir. So that kind of established him. He got to the point where he really liked dealing with this history. He had access, because his family saved everything. They were one of those who didn't throw anything at all away. He also knew the Hawleys and was aware of what they had as a family. So as a result he started writing "papers" as he called them for *The Newtown Bee*. Those papers were long explanations of what had happened in the past. He talked about ministers that were here, and developed little biographical sketches of all of them, for all the major churches that were here—accounts of the other churches in addition to the Congregational and Episcopal. And then he started dealing with other aspects of [the town] even down to the Men's Club, which he was a member of near the end of his life—The Men's Literary and Social Club of Newtown Street.

So he was on the forefront of the history of that time. What he was doing was very often copying the tax list, for example, of 1790. He put the whole thing in *The Bee.* But it was preserved there, so it was available. Now, it is still available at the Town Clerk's office, but try to find it—they know where it is now because I went down to look for it. But the fact remains that a lot of these were buried in town records and people had trouble reading the old handwriting. Some of it was faded. Some of it was damaged. A little more than a hundred years ago he managed to

transcribe all of that and so it is available in his notes, and it is also available in what he published in *The Newtown Bee*. So he was preserving primary documents, material that would be available for the first time from his research in town records. So he preserved the town records. That is another reason why he deserves to be called the first historian of Newtown.

Eliza Camp was his wife. When he died in 1914, she thought it would be fitting to take this stuff that had been published in *The Newtown Bee* with the cooperation and with aid of the editors, who were friends of his, and put them together as a kind of memorial to him called, *Newtown's History and Historian*. It included a brief biographical sketch of both of them at the beginning. Then a collection of all the stuff that came out of *The Bee*. It didn't include everything that came out in *The Bee*. I subsequently found other articles in there that never made it into the final compilation. That was published in 1918, shortly before Eliza died.

Was that our first history book about Newtown?

Remember back in 1905 they published the souvenir of the bicentennial? That really was the first comprehensive historic sketch. There had been sermons that had been published up here that included other vignettes and that sort of thing, odds and ends, but the first comprehensive sketch was that bicentennial souvenir. Really, the later publication by his wife was nothing more than an expansion of that.

He included people's memories if it was something that he was writing about anyway. And very often he would get a person's biographical data and then weave it into something else he was doing. But the fact remains that a lot of it was his memory, personally, because he lived through most of the 19th century. When he was a kid there were people around who fought in the Revolution. So he is getting that type of information first hand. It is coming more from him than it is second-hand information. Second-hand information in writing local history is very difficult to judge, because retroactive memory plays such a part in that. Retroactive memory is a situation when you look back and try to remember an event in the past, and see things that really didn't happen quite the way that it actually occurred. And so that accounts for discrepancies between eyewitness accounts and that sort of thing. In fact, most courts have begun to realize that because retroactive memory is so powerful a factor for most people, its evidence is weak in judging court cases. A good defense attorney will harp on that. The fact remains that the town historian has to deal with the same problem and the fact that people remember things differently when you are weighing different types of evidence. Okay, which story of the two or three you have is a more accurate reflection of what really did occur? That is a big factor in dealing with local history. And he had to deal with the same thing.

He was a fascinating character and entirely devoted to the community. Later in his life he was very widely traveled. He went across the country a couple of times, because one of his sons became the bishop of South Dakota. So he went visiting him, and after the son retired to California, he went out to visit him several times. So he was fairly widely traveled and also had a breadth of understanding about

what the national scene was in addition to the local scene. He was not just a local farmer and educator.

What type of farming did he do?

I'm just beginning to discover that. They were raising the normal crops that were around here. Corn, wheat and that sort of thing. In fact I am just now doing research on the range of crops that were raised here and the range of animals that were raised here. That will be out in an essay in a newsletter shortly. And I assume he was doing pretty much the same thing. At this point I don't have a comprehensive list of things that he was raising on his farm. I have some incidental mentions of it and I'm in the process of still pulling that together. So that's a work-in-progress.

Was he born here?

Yes.

So here we have a Newtown native, he's a farmer, he's a highly educated person who worked in the educational system for fifty years. He's widely traveled in the U.S. He's an author. So really he's one of the intellectuals of Newtown documenting its history. I never really looked at him that way, before you gave me more background about him.

He was a very principled man. In fact, his neighbor in the later years of his life, Sarah Mannix, who we did an oral history of, and in fact our first oral history was of her, and I remember her reminiscences of the fact he was "scary." The reason she said that was he was kind of dour and very serious. He did have a sense of humor and his humor comes out in several different ways. And of course the things that he was writing, but apparently he was also very stern. He would have made a good teacher in the old school.

We had talked relatively recently about how archeology is so important to local history. Maybe you could tell me how archeology fits into that and if there are any other disciplines that you can think of that might dovetail nicely with completing the picture of local history?

A local history benefits from all of the social sciences. Every one of them makes a contribution one way or another, whether it be the study of changes in literacy or changes in literature. Social theory and that sort of thing. Archeology, however, has been one of the most fruitful, because what it essentially does is go to the place where something may have happened and by excavating and finding out what was left behind, digging through the garbage pits of the past, you are able to piece together the type of life that was being led there. And so it serves as a foundation for much of what you come to know later as part of the town, documenting social changes through the material culture of the people who lived

back then. And that also documents the changes of behavioral patterns, changes in ways of thinking.

For example, one area that I became interested in very early in my education in local history were gravestones. And gravestones reflected the change in thought processes about death as you move from the 18th into the 19th, and then later into the 20th century. So I became acutely aware at a very early age that these artifacts that had been left behind by people in the past, and the folk art that was on the tombstones, would indicate something more about the people than what you were reading in somebody's third-hand history account.

I have been fascinated by archeology since I was a kid. I followed my father around when he visited various archeological sites, including up here in Lake Lillinonah when the Bridgeport Archeological Society was excavating a site up there, and was just absolutely fascinated by the fact that these stone tools that were coming out of that site up there were 4,000 years old. I mean they went back to the time of the pyramids and before. Even as a smart-ass little kid, I recognized the fact that the pyramids were deep history and important. And so those types of connections made it a fascination for me and it continues to do that. An example of that was introducing a course in anthropology in high school. The students actually took part in the recovery of historic data and so they had a chance to see how it was actually done with hands-on experience. Not in a contrived environment like the Archeology-in-a-Sandbox, which is salted with artifacts, but they were actually getting out and seeing what was out there in the field and how it was interpreted by archeologists and then later employed by historians. They could actually see this process unfold before them.

The ultimate result, a kind of magna opus of my archeological work, was the work we did over in Putnam Park, which is just an extension of what was going on here. It was a winter encampment under General Israel Putnam in the winter of 1778-79. There were three actual encampments including the park itself that embodies the eastern most encampment that was there, and was very well preserved. There were actually above ground stone remains of the chimneys of the huts of the soldiers who were living there. So we had a real guide as to how they laid out the little village they had. And we could actually excavate the individual huts down to the living floor and gain all kinds of information about the lifestyle. Building on that and the historic record, we have a good picture of what a Revolutionary War winter camp was about.

Now, based on the information we had, we were part of a symposium both in Mobile, Alabama, and again in Providence with the Society of American Archeology. We presented papers, and at another one in Buffalo, so we were working with other people in military archeology trading information with them, presenting these symposia with all of us involved with it. Then with regard to Putnam Park, because I insisted on publishing the data we found, it ended up as a book, *The History and Archeology of Putnam's Revolutionary War Winter Encampment.* As I said, that was a fulfillment of everything we had done in terms of what archeology can do. But that was a major example and I was able to hold this up later to students and say, "This is what your research [culminated in], what you have been digging through the dirt on weekends and getting punchy digging

out artifacts, and the excitement of digging out other artifacts that were really quite something. You had your hand in the past." And this came sharply home for them. One of my students, for example, was sitting there and had uncovered something, he didn't even recognize it at first, and it turned out to be a small pair of scissors that one of the soldiers had carried with him. It had been deposited on the floor and for some reason had been forgotten or maybe they had been stepped on and pushed into the dirt floor. The soldier lost it essentially, on the rock on which he had been sitting. It was at the base of that rock. And then there were three buttons that he had replaced that were broken; he replaced from a garment he had been working on. Apparently he had snipped them with the scissors and they had fallen just a little beyond where the scissors were located. As the student was in the process of uncovering that with me standing over him, I said: "You have to realize that this is the first time in two hundred and twenty-five years that anybody has seen that. The last person who saw it was the guy who lost it when he was mending his pants." It was one of those neat moments when everybody was absolutely quiet just contemplating what this meant. It was almost spiritual. It was delightful. That is what archeology is capable of doing. The information can be read in the book, which you can get at the local library, or at the modest price of twenty dollars. That is a shameless commercial.

A shameless commercial. [Laughter] In something I was reading recently said that you taught your students at Joel Barlow in your archeology classes the "importance of careful, controlled excavation to recover the maximum amount of information." I think that would relate also to researching for local history – careful excavation.

This again goes back to the principle that I mentioned a little while ago that I consider so important. When you dig, you destroy. And so it is incumbent upon you to be able to record and make available as much information as you can about the site you are working on. Or the research project that you are working on. That is why it is important to save notes in addition to the finished product, because very often they contain information that never gets into the finished product that people later, going back over your papers, might be able to use and discover something else. In the case of archeology, the careful, controlled excavation is absolutely vital. It has become a principle now in many excavations that you never excavate the whole site. This was pioneered in the Middle East, in the Holy Land specifically that you never dig out the entire city as the old timers used to do with Troy and that sort of thing. In fact, the old time archaeologists never got their hands dirty. They sat in a tent and had all the workers that were out there bring the artifacts to them. Well, that sometimes has unfortunate consequences. The workers on one site in the Holy Land began to realize that you got more with each piece you brought in, so they came up with an artifact called the Moabite stone that had an inscription on it. One of the excavators realized, wow, I'm only going to get one coin for this, but if I make many pieces of it I will get more coins. So he broke it up and brought it [into the tent] in pieces. That is another reason why the person who is directing the dig

should be in the dig watching what is going on at all times. Not that our diggers are unscrupulous.

But whereas the classical archaeologists dug out an entire city, the idea was to dig out just small sections of it, and leave it, recognizing that at some time in the future, there will be men and women coming along who will have much better technology to extract even more information from the ground than you were able to do today. And they have part of a site then can work with. The ideal situation in all of this is to not dig at all. If you can try to turn the soil transparent, and be able to recover as much data as possible without actually having to disturb the soil. And so this is why remote sensing has become a big thing today, including things like ground penetrating radar, even aerial photography and that sort of thing, which was pioneered during the second world war, to recover as much information before you even think of putting a spade in the ground. Or maybe don't think about doing it at all. But that to me is maximum recovery, because you aren't moving anything. It all is staying right where it is. Now, obviously, you can't always do that. And there is always going to be the situation where a question comes up and you have to get in the soil and get your hands dirty and find out what's there. But ideally, you sit there, you turn the soil transparent, and see everything that's there.

The ground penetrating radar. What could that reveal?

We've used it in this area primarily for locating lost burials and that sort of thing in cemeteries. For example, down in Easton we found an area in the Center Cemetery that didn't have any tombstones. The question was, does that mean that is open for modern burials? The cemetery dated primarily from the 19th century. When we got ground penetrating radar down there and I was working with a guy that came down, we began to notice that there were anomalies in the ground. There was no stone standing there; no indication of a burial, yet there was a burial there. We found that strip of land had over eighty burials at one time or another. Later, that led us to find and document the fact that that had been a potter's field where the people who had been buried who were indigent and just couldn't provide means of burial. You had somebody in town who had died and people didn't even know who he was. They found a body in the woods, into potter's field it went. But the ability to be able to determine that yes, there is a grave there has been invaluable, especially in wartime cemeteries, in recovering that type of information.

There are now many other remote sensing techniques, including sonar, especially underwater. The geophysical studies that measure magnetic anomalies in the earth and sundry other helpful pieces of equipment for which you need authorities, people who can work that technology for you. So what's happened in archeology is that archeology is a team effort. It is not that one guy out in the boonies troweling through the soil recovering artifacts for his collection; there are now many people who are handling different aspects of the excavation itself. The guy who is actually doing the digging, yes, but you also have guys that are giving you formal analysis and determining what kind of animals were there based on bone recovery. All kinds of studies of pollen and that sort of thing to determine plant life that was there to reconstructing environment. So as I said, it is very much a

team effort, and it is one of the few areas of the sciences that exemplifies that to an extreme degree. It is teamwork. It is the guys in there with their specialties coming together to yield the big picture. An archeologist now is mostly in a position of coordinating the data coming from these various sources.

The first excavations I had done with high school students were, in fact, down in the old Lufkin farm in Poverty Hollow. I had walked the field after he had plowed and had found the various types of stone tools that were there. So I took a group of students from the high school and we set out test trenches on top. [We] found that the top of this particular knoll where most of the stuff had been found after the plowing, had stone tools of every culture that had ever lived in the area at one time or another. This knoll was surrounded by a swamp, which at one time was an old glacial pond—so it was surrounded by water on at least three sides. And it was just an ideal location for hunters, going all the way back. The oldest piece we found down there dated back 8,000 years ago. It was a bifurcated point which was made during what we call the Early Archaic Period, and it was one of the oldest things found in Newtown. Unfortunately what we found at the site itself didn't have any integrity. It had been deep plowed. But we had found evidence that was typical of the people who lived here from 8,000 years ago right down to the present time, including some historic material. So, yeah, that was something that was a lot of fun and a good way to start off in town, since we couldn't do much more destruction of the site and yet the information that we got from it was of some value and students got a chance to see how it was recovered. So, yeah, we've done some of that and I've done a lot of survey work, of course, in town as well. And a lot of work with other people in the state.

I've been a member of the Archeological Society of Connecticut since the mid-1960s, and was its president for eighteen years. So that put me in touch with archeologists from other areas, which was great, because when I needed somebody with expertise in an area to explain to students how it worked, I could call on them to come down and take a class or two, including the State Archeologist who came regularly. He was always doing something exciting, so when he came into class it was always great to see. He would always be kind of disheveled and dirty, because he had just come out of the field. Then he would start to talk about what he was finding and it was mesmerizing. I mean, the whole class was just absolutely silent and transfixed. Nick Bellatoni is just one of those type of guys who has charisma coming out his ears. Really great things would come out of archeology, including his signature site—he discovered the remains of a burial on the other side of the state that proved the belief in vampires. Not that there were vampires, but that people believed in vampires and they would go to great extent to make sure that the dead remained dead. He found archeological evidence for that. Which means around Halloween time you never try to call the state archeologist, because he was speaking literally back-to-back on vampires in New England. But this is the beautiful part about being part of an organization like the Archeological Society. I got a chance to work with some of the great people in the state archeology and they got to know me, so when I showed up on a site that most people would have been banned from, I was at least ushered onboard because I

knew the guy who was directing the dig. And had a chance to become involved with it. In some cases I got a chance to see some truly fine excavation.

One good example of that was the case up in New Milford. And I brought a student up there to help with that one. When they were expanding the New Milford High School's athletic fields they discovered some cultural remains. They hired Lucy Lavin, who is now connected with the Institute for American Indian Studies to come down and do the contract work and find out what was actually there, which she had to do by law before they could put the fields in. She had a limited amount of time, unfortunately, and she was overwhelmed. I remember driving down the little driveway that led down to the area that they were opening up. She had stripped off some of the topsoil and marked with flags all the features and artifacts that were there. And it was a sea of flags that went for three or four acres. It was one of the most spectacular sites in this part of the state.

We spent a couple of days working with her, cross sectioning features and that sort of thing, but you actually could see where the building remains were, based on the post moles, the rotted remains of the posts that held the house up. We actually could outline the dwelling area with two hearths or sometimes three hearths on the inside. I mean it was such a rich site. Unfortunately she was only able to do a short part of it before they had to come in and put in a baseball field or whatever. So there are people up there now playing baseball on top of Indian remains. But it was a spectacular site and those opportunities were opened up because of my association with that. There are a lot of people in the state to whom I am very, very grateful, because they did usher me onto the site to show me what was there, and very often come down to speak to students in the classroom or they would come down to give me a hand if I had questions. Over in Putnam Park, for example, we had people come in all the time, offering information, or just to see what we were doing. So I tried to reciprocate as much as I possibly could.

I understand at least twenty-five of your own students have gone on to become professional archeologists as well as professors of archeology.

Yes, it has been kind of exciting. They range across the board. They weren't all in archeology by any means, although most of them were. I had one guy who was interested in mystic philosophies and went ahead and wrote his dissertation on an obscure sutra in India. He is now working as a professor in New Zealand. I hear from him occasionally. So it had broad impact even beyond just archeology.

That must be very satisfying.

Yes, it is. It is exciting because they stay in touch with me, and I get a chance to hear what they are doing now and the impact of what they had studied is having on their life. So, yes, it has been an exciting part of it.

You taught your archeology class – was that the only one you knew of in a high school at that time?

Yes. At the time we instituted it, it was. We introduced the course, I think, in 1971 in anthropology, and we devoted the first quarter of it to archeology and what it was and how it is done. I tried on several occasions, although I wasn't able to do it every year, to devote weekends to actually getting out in the field. So I was with them in the classroom and then in the field, so they get to see and experience what the excavation was like. And then at the beginning of the next week when we came back, I'd go over the finds that they had and what that possibly meant so they could see that this was a process that was evolving slowly, and how it worked. It has been the exciting part to see what they had taken away. A lot of them went into allied fields, but it was the fact that they were in allied fields that was important as far as I was concerned.

In that article that Curtiss wrote, you mentioned that you tried not to use the term "history" when you were teaching your history classes in high school. The kids "hated history," is what you said, but you tried to engage them by asking them to find out where their street name came from or the history of their house or something like that. And you found that they got really excited when it was something personal.

Yes. What I had done early in my career was to institute a course in local history. No surprise there. It was one of those that was mostly sophomores and seniors. The purpose of putting that course together started with a different rationale than I would use probably today. A number of students were bored as a result of the type of textbooks they were using, the type of approach of teaching history. They just could not see the relevance in it, and to a certain extent I commiserated with them. The way it was being taught to them was pretty bloody dull. And so as a result, this course was primarily meant to show them that history was not always the legislation being fought over in Washington by Congress and the President and so on, but it was actually what was going on in your back yard.

So I constructed a course that was primarily to show them that. Although they got history credit for it, but they didn't take it as just a "history" course. You could get up to a B, just based on doing the course requirements. For an A you had to do an original research project, which would take you out into land records and whatever else, like interviewing people, to find out as much information as you could on your area.

Well this was a two-edged sword. Not only did it show them that history was everywhere around them, but it also meant that here was a source of information coming back to me that they were digging out of the local community. As I explained to them, this course is being based on all the past students who have taken this who have contributed to the body of information that we have on Easton or Redding, wherever they happened to live. So that was the original purpose—to show them that history was not boring. It was in fact quite exciting and could lead to the type of information that I described in finding new information on Mary Hawley.

A lot of them responded well that way. I got a lot of good feedback from parents, especially after we did something on how you recognize an old house and

an old house style. A lot of students really got wrapped up and enjoyed that, because as they drove around town they could see examples of different types of architecture and different kinds of farmsteads. And they started telling that with great authority to their parents. I would get feedback from the parents that a trip to the store was no longer a trip to the store. It was a guided tour of that section of town. Which was good. That was what the thing was meant to do.

My goal in that was to expand their understanding of what history was, and what history could do. It is also a lifetime hobby. It is one of those things that regardless of where you move, you are going to find parallels with what you had back here, and it gives you a basis to understand where you moved to. And I have had that happen time and time again when I get an email or whatever, response of one sort or another from a student who's just discovered something in his local community now far away from here that made sense based on what we were doing in high school. So as far as I was concerned it was a very successful course.

~ Becoming Town Historian, Challenges, and Fascinating Finds ~

Maybe we could talk about your background and when you developed an interest in history. I know you had mentioned something about the Brooks family genealogy, but I would like to start a little earlier. And, again, in Curtiss Clark's story that he wrote for The Bee *in 1994 he did such a nice portrait of you and your interest in history. He says, "When Dan Cruson was a boy, he remembers lying awake on such nights in a vacation home in Waterford, Connecticut, listening to his father, a dentist, and his father's friends indulging themselves in long speculative conservations about an interest they shared, ancient civilization." That was the genesis of your thinking about other cultures and being interested in history?*

Yes, that's part of it. I don't remember a time when I wasn't interested in history. So that is really part of it. That incident that you just alluded to lying awake listening to my father and my uncles, were the other ones. They were all related. For example, one of them had been walking down on the beach and had found charcoal in the sandbank that was there, and had found part of a skull and some pottery with it. They were just talking about what they had found and where it had been found. And I can remember being tremendously excited about the fact that they discovered the remains of somebody and of an early culture. I didn't know much about dating at that point, so it didn't mean too much to me, but it was the remains of somebody who had been there long ago and had just recently been discovered. And I was absolutely fascinated. Unfortunately, I went to sleep and I never got the rest of the story. But the fact remains that because my father was interested in that sort of thing, and so were our relatives, the stories of people and where they had lived were exciting to the family, and therefore were frequently told. And that also included ancestors that they could remember back a couple of generations and that's what impelled my father to start the Brooks genealogy.

This was an interesting juxtaposition of early interests. Dad had gotten tired of my relatives claiming that the Brooks family was related to Lord Say and Lord Brook of Saybrook. They tapped into that, which my father knew was a royal line. And he also knew that the Brooks that were coming over here were not royal by any means, they were peasants. So as a result, he went out to try to prove that, no, there was no connection between Lord Say and Lord Brook, and in fact he did find that. But in the process he traced the line back with some gaps in it, all the way back to Henry Brooks in the 17th century who had settled out on Great Neck where we still had summer homes and the rest of the family had settled. In fact my family had been on that beach for 250 years. My mother's side of the family.

At any rate, only much later as I got to try to figure out there was a mystery involved in Ezekiel Brooks. We couldn't quite make the times match between Ezekiel and his son. There was obviously something missing there. And I can remember going up to the State Library at one point doing research on something else and then taking the last hour or so to work on the Brooks genealogy, and I found a death notice. It was the only indication we had that there was a third Ezekiel Brooks. There was Ezekiel senior, junior, who went over onto Fisher's Island and died over there, and then his son, who came back, so there were actually three of them and it solved the problem that we've been dealing with for a long time.

So junior was missing.

Yes, junior was one of those who had been buried over on Fisher's Island. And we had no idea that any of the family had ever even gone over there for a visit, much less had lived over there. But that was one of those moments, again, where I had a "high" that lasted all the way home from the State Library. It was just the fact that I had found the answer to something, a question we had been asking for a long period of time. It was obvious these were the seeds that were planted in my childhood that were things that later informed further research somewhere that enabled me to solve several of these problems and just reinforce the predilection for studying local history and genealogy. As a result, I always had that interest. I can't remember a time when I wasn't fascinated by those early stories of our ancestors.

And then you did your senior thesis on economics of pre-Hispanic Peru.

Yes. This is the explanation. My father was a scientist. He was a dentist, but he was a natural history buff and he was an ecologist long before the term became fashionable. He kind of trained me to keep notebooks and keep notes of things. When I went off to college my real interest at that point being in science, was to become an engineer. I wanted to build bridges and discover new principles. Well, about my sophomore year in college, I was doing a stress analysis of a thru truss bridge. And the professor came over and looked at and puzzled over my drawing, and he said: You realize that will collapse; the element that you have down there is over stressed; it is not going to hold. And I realized that I could kill people doing this. So as a result, after thinking this thing through, I decided, well, I'll get into

economics, which I loved anyway. But again, it was tied in with history, so that was something I was interested and I had already started my interest in anthropology. So as a result, that was a nice compromise, so I changed my major to economics. Therefore when there was a problem, I could always assume my way out of it. Something I couldn't do if I was an engineer and the bridge failed.

So when it came time for a thesis, as I said I can be a bit of a smart aleck in this. I decided I'll do the economy of the Inca and why that was not like the market economies of the west. And why you can't use the same tools of economic analysis on a pre-market economy. Well, that made my department very happy in that I was contravening (read: note of sarcasm)—I was actually scraping all of the things that they had as the laws of economics and economic study. As a result I didn't get the distinction or honors as a result of the thesis. But what I had done was to go back through the work of many economic anthropologists who had approached the same problem and find that the definitions of western economy don't always fit in a pre-historic context.

So as a result that is what got me into doing some iconoclastic studies. I did one of them on the Roman economy, too. It showed that although they were getting there, they still hadn't arrived in a true market economy. The same terms that were being used in modern economics could not be used. The economic dynamics were wrong. But that was an extension of all of these threads that had been kicking around in the past. That is actually what I am doing now is kind of tying all those threads together and getting all the notes ready to turn them over to somebody else to labor over.

Passing the baton.

Yes. Passing the buck.

[Laughter] You don't want to tell them that. When did the local history interest take hold for you?

That had always been there, too. I have always been interested in the places where we lived. Especially as I found remains, ruins, whatever, artifacts of the past. But I think probably it began to take direction in 1968. In 1968 there was a movement afoot, and I was living in Easton at that point, because that is where I grew up, and at that point there was a move afoot to save one of the one-room schoolhouses in Easton. They got a group together to do that, and they successfully moved it onto a plot of ground leased to them by the Bridgeport Hydraulic Company. That caused the formation of the Easton Historical Society. We had gotten together, a whole group of us, and they were looking for volunteers to become part of the board, and I raised my hand, and that was fateful. As a result I became part of that and I later went on to serve as vice president. But I became very much involved in that and as soon as I did, we moved the schoolhouse and there were questions as to where the schoolhouse had been. We knew where it had been originally, but what was the history of it? Where had it developed? So I got interested in researching that. And one thing led to another and it was an

extension of that. Since I graduated from Joel Barlow High School, which served both Easton and Redding, my interest naturally spread up to Redding and since Newtown was a counterpart—Newtown and Redding developed along parallel lines, it obviously became that my interests extended up to here. And when I finally moved here in 1970 it became more acute, especially as I joined the Newtown Historical Society. One thing led to another and it snowballed out of control.

You've served many roles [in the Newtown Historical Society]. How long were you president?

For about five years, late 80s to early 90s.

Can you tell me the progression of events that led to you becoming town historian for Newtown?

There was really no great transition to becoming town historian. It was just a kind of continuation of where I was. I had been doing this type of research and writing before 1994, and at that point we had a good group of people in the Historical Society who were active and energetic, and a couple of them decided to champion the idea of creating the town historian here, and they were the ones who actually brought it to the legislative council to make the position. Basically it was the fact that I was being rewarded for what I was doing for Newtown's history by now becoming official in that capacity. And as I said before, that meant that I actually got stationery and business cards. So it was just a natural outgrowth of what I was already doing. There was no real change in status. It was more of a change when I finally got this office up here and the vaults and so forth where I can make the mess you see now.

Was there anyone between Ezra Johnson and you that had a significant historian role in Newtown?

I think Ezra Johnson, by virtue of the fact that he lived half the history of Newtown. I mean he was working on the bicentennial, but at that point he was in his 80s, so he lived through a good deal of the stuff he was writing about. We had other people who were interested in history. Like Ed Storrs, for example, who was working with the Historical Society's photograph collection. We had other people who had known about aspects of the town itself, so there were people around who were interested in the history and were resources, but yeah, not somebody who was as comprehensively interested in it as either Ezra Johnson or myself. Ed Storrs was a major authority on the railroad in this area and had published a couple of articles on it. So as I said, he was very good in that area, but there were other areas that were tangential to his interests which he never penetrated. It was never his intention to get too far into it. So, as I said, it is a quantum difference between the people that we are dealing with and the areas that they were particular interested in, and myself, for example, who took it on as an avocation.

And kind of unify all that information. Do you think no one wanted to do this knowing what it might mean? You said you were sort of put up by the society. You were a great choice, but I wondered if people realized what an important role, and how much time it would require.

I don't think anybody really realized it, including myself. It was just a matter that they never considered the fact that they, too, could become interested in productive local history. I think the degree, the magnitude of effort that can be put into it only became clear as I got more and more deeply embroiled in the history, myself, and began to realize that. You can see looking around you at the stuff here in the office, it still needs to be filed and needs to be cataloged and recorded. Time is a factor. I don't think it affected anybody else. I had no competition.

It wasn't the fact no one wanted it; they never thought of doing it. And I think that's the case with a lot of people who have gotten interested in their old house, and started the research and then got bogged down, and then eventually found their way to me. As I sat down with them and started going through what they were doing and suggested further areas, they began to realize that yeah, this could be quite time consuming, but took it on as a hobby, as I warned them beforehand it would become. As a result, they then became fascinated by it and very often carried it through to some [conclusion]. We have some remarkable house histories that have been done by people here in town who persevered. You kind of get sucked into this. I certainly did, except my interest was broad. It included the entire town rather than one small house. As I said, I don't think people in their own right were put off by it—they never considered becoming historians. Many never considered what they were doing to be "history."

What difference has having this office made for you as an historian?

[NOTE: Within six months of this interview, the town historian's office and vault at Edmond Town was leased to a private organization and Dan Cruson was offered a small vault at the Municipal Center in which to house materials and conduct business.]

I now have places where I can keep things that are valuable that I feel are safe. I was always a little leery in the fact that we stored a lot of stuff that we had including the account books in the Matthew Curtis house, which is made out of wood and is subject to fire. So, the big thing is I now have a place where we can really do some preservation with an eye to permanent preservation here with the vault. The idea that I had a place to come was nice, because it got me out of the house, and this became a different environment within which to work. I could write here in addition to other things. So it was helpful from that standpoint. It also meant that I had a place to meet with people, which I could always [access] and was not subject to hours. For example, if I met in one of the meeting rooms of the library, I had to be there when their hours were and other people weren't using it. So now I have a place of my own where I could meet and we could talk endlessly, deep into the night if necessary. But I have that available to me and people have a place to

come when they have a question. I frequently get people dropping in with just a simple one or two questions that they were looking for answers to, but it became an area where I could further act as a lightning rod for historical information from the town. I'm looking forward to getting this better organized where we can also have kids come in when they tour the town hall to see displays that I will be setting up. Artifacts and stuff that are here. And we have some exhibits, some things that are truly remarkable and are great. They are things that people really react to, and I can use that especially with younger kids.

For example, we have a slave document, a deed for the ownership of a young girl who was three years old, from one neighbor to another for twenty-five cents dated 1813. Now, this is first of all a bill of sale that was responsible for transferring the ownership of a person to somebody else. This brings the reality of slavery in the north. And as I said, it is actually signed by the guy who was selling the young girl. It mentions her mother and the fact that she was being manumitted when she turned twenty-one.

We also have, for example, a series of photographs that were given to me by an anonymous owner of post mortem photographs. Highlight a Victorian custom, which is little known now, but recording the death of a child by photographing it. So in this case I can pull out a daguerreotype—an early type of photography that dates from the 1840s and 50s. Or an ambrotype or tintype that show in the last century a dead child, which is always a little creepy, but it is a type of pleasant creepy that engages students to see that type of thing more clearly. And as I said, it is one of the things that they come in and say: Wow, look at that! Which is one of the things I want to do to pull them in.

So that is another thing about having the office here where I can keep that stuff and get at it immediately to show it to them. It is also the place where we store photographs for the town. The historic image archives, for example, that we set up. So as a result, I can pull out photographs of Main Street and what that looked like one hundred years ago, and use that also to stimulate further interest in Main Street. So that is one of the other benefits of having an office.

How much help do you have?

Virtually none. I don't have any formal help or interns or anything, but I do have people that come in and give me a hand in certain specific areas on certain specific projects. For example, my daughter-in-law who is interested in psychology knew that we had the archive of Director Leach who was the guy who guided the formation of Fairfield Hills Mental Hospital. And who had been the director up in Meriden. We had purchased his papers, and this included photographs and documentary material on the formation of Fairfield Hills that we previously did not have. But it was all in a cardboard box. The box is right over there. She became fascinated with "How do we organize this?" So she came in and started working with part of the collection and has now been working with the rest of it, cataloging what's there, what it refers to, getting it on the computer so that we will eventually have it available so people can gain ready access to it. So I have people like that.

Dan and his son and assistant Ben Cruson examine documents and bottles from a store in Sandy Hook that operated as a grocery for about 100 years. These artifacts date to the 1940s when the store was run by the Davy Brothers. (Photo courtesy: *The Newtown Bee*)

Grant Ossendryver, who just moved to town a short time ago and wanted to get involved in the town's history, has also been going through the Curtis papers. These are the papers of the guys who formed Curtis and Sons, the company, and later became Curtis Packaging. He's been going through and doing something very similar with some of the account books and the accounting papers we have for them.

So I get people coming in on specific projects and occasionally people who are looking for volunteer credits with the high school. The quality of the work is uneven, but at least the basics are getting done. I can smooth over the rough edges. So, no, there is not much in the way of help this year, but the help that is here I am very grateful for.

How do you house your material and where does the money come from to buy archival housing?

We are trying to use archival practices that have become somewhat standardized, especially with local historical organizations throughout the country. In terms of the material we need, acid-free folders and that sort of thing to properly house the material. Most of [the cost of] that comes out of my hip pocket; I've been self-financing a good deal of it. First of all, because I didn't want to go through the politics necessary to become a line item in the town budget, which would always be under fire from people who are trying to cut the budget. And then it would become a political football. I have steadfastly tried to refuse to be partisan in terms of political action. That type of politics has no place here. As a result it has been

just as easy to go down to Staples and buy a bunch of legal size acid-free folders and page protectors or whatever else I happen to need.

I had done some favors for Julia Wasserman, helping her sort through stuff that had been taken from her house that burned down, tragically, a number of years ago. For that she asked what she could do to help [me] set up the office. So as a result of a generous grant from her, it allowed me to get some of the basic things that I needed to turn it into an office. Things like rulers, pencils and pens and all that mundane stuff that go into this sort of thing. But she helped get it started, and I have always been very grateful to her.

What about the archival boxes that you might put a quilt in or something like that. Is that funded through the Historical Society?

Some smaller things have. We had a series of donations—we got grant material that gave us the boxes and some of the stuff. We'd also found a couple of museums that were going out of business and, in one case, they had all these archival boxes left because they were transferring [their collection] to a different system or a different series of processes. So as a result we have some of that stuff that we have adapted for our own use. So some of that has come as a result of scrounging. Scavenging is a big part of local history preservation.

Resourcefulness. Maybe you can talk to me about a few of the most interesting things that have walked into this office.

Of course the couple of things that I mentioned earlier would fall into that category. I suppose the most exciting thing to have come in was a donation of material that came in from the west coast. This was the Adams family material. A fellow had contacted me who I vaguely remember. I had known his mother who worked at the high school when I was there, so I had known the Zilinek family. Bill Zillinek who lives out on the west coast now, and after his mother had died, inherited a box of material that had belonged originally to one of their neighbors here. I learned over time that I've been doing this, never say no to something like that even though it doesn't sound promising to begin with. And I hadn't made the connection at that point with the Adams family who is John Adams, the president, John Quincy Adams and that branch of the family. [Mr. Zilinek] arrived with his daughter and his daughter's friend—they were adults—and came in and sat down and uncovered a wrapped frame on which there was all kinds of stuff. It was wrapped in bubble wrap. As I started to go through it my mouth dropped open. The first thing I saw were a series of cufflinks that were made out of twenty dollar gold pieces that had the owner's initial on the back. I then found two miniature paintings—we haven't identified the subjects of the paintings yet, but they were gorgeous and they were obviously done by a true artist. We haven't found out who he is, but we are still working on that. The high point of the whole thing was a bracelet and some other jewelry that came from Abigail Adams and were made

Dan holds the framed bracelet and brooch owned by Abigail Adams and created from her husband John Adam's hair. (Photo courtesy: *The Newtown Bee*)

from the hair of her husband, John Adams. So I can say with some authority that I am one of the few people who has ever stroked the hair of the second president of the United States. But it was that type of personal thing and we had notes in there that explained these connections. And it turns out there were other things like the inaugural medal for John Quincy Adams, which is extremely rare. They produced very few for him. Material related to the opening of the Erie Canal. Some stuff we are still not exactly sure how it ties together. For example, we have a commission for a man who became an officer in the British army in New York signed by King George I. I think it was in the first year of his reign. The signature is genuine; it is his.

And so as I said there were all kinds of things in there that we have been researching for the past several years. What we were able to do with this, again, the Adams family did not, to the best of my knowledge, spend any time in Newtown. Although Judge William Edmonds was a federalist and knew Adams when he served as president in Washington. He was the first president to live in Washington DC. Edmonds went to dinner at his house and that sort of thing. So I mean it is not completely unlikely that they would have visited each other, but I have no record of it. The fascinating part of it was that these were national figures who I had artifacts from. So what we ended up doing, ultimately I ended up publishing a full account in a couple issues of the newsletter. And then we put on a program. We [completed the] grant application. We won the grant [from the Connecticut Humanities Council].

That enabled us to house the material properly. We put it in a display case and we had an open program so people could come and see what artifacts were that we found, and *The Newtown Bee* nicely covered that as well. And we had a lot of fun with it as a result of that. I also made it available for people who want to see what it actually is. We keep it in the vault. I am always struck by the fact that it has rather substantial monetary value, but for us from an historic standpoint it has so

much more importance than that. And the collection together is of tremendous interest. That was probably the most exciting thing to come in, in terms of its connection with a national politics or national history. So that is a big one that comes immediately to mind.

We've gotten a lot of small stuff, things that are not terribly exciting to the average individual, but to me, they are tremendously exciting. A good example is the bottle that has been lent to us by Steve Paproski. It was a beer bottle, apparently with a stopper. On it was embossed Michael J. Houlihan, who we knew was a hotelkeeper. He was in charge of the Grand Central Hotel, which was where John Vouros lives now on the corner of West Street and Main. So I knew immediately that that was where it came from, but it also had an embossment on the bottom that it indicated a company down in Bridgeport. [I endeavored] to find out how much I could find out not only about Houlihan, but see what information I could squeeze from this bottle about what went on here in Newtown. And at a rather important Newtown hotel.

By the time I was finished we were able to discover the company down in Pennsylvania that was responsible for making the glass, blowing the bottle itself. And I managed to get some information about a distributor up here in Bridgeport. They managed to fill it with signature beer for Michael Houlihan. He apparently served that in the bar lounge that was in the lower floor of what became the Yankee Drover, back when it was the Grand Central. From that bottle we were able to develop a lot of information. Well, that's something that is very important. I consider it to be very important, because of just what I was able to do.

And so that is why we have a lot of those little treasures, too, that are not things that would spark any interest at all on a national level, but it did on a local level. [Houlihan] was an important guy who was here. He served in the state legislature, he was widely thought of, and he was Irish and at that point there was a split between the Irish and Yankee settlers in this area, and he was very successful. He was a Democrat, but we won't hold that against him. He was a very successful man. An Irishman in Newtown.

For people who are interested in athletics, we have now most of the records and photographs for the Sandy Hook Athletic Association (SAC), which existed from 1947, just after the Second World War, up until just a few years ago. So we have that type of material for people who are interested in sports. There are examples of early baseball games and all kinds of other athletics that were centered in Sandy Hook. And again, they were part of the town. So we have been able to preserve things like that.

The cobbler bench?

I haven't been as excited about that as I have been about some other things, only because they are fairly common. Those have been widely preserved. That's an early one. It is probably 19th century. And I have yet to get it into some space where it can be displayed. We will do that shortly. We will have it in the farm museum, which is in a little barn in back of the Matthew Curtiss house.

How about some of the furniture that was made here in Newtown.

Most of that furniture has come in but I haven't been as directly involved in that. For example, we have a clock which is one of two examples that are known, made by a clockmaker who lived in what is today Brookfield but at that point it was part of Newtown. It was a very rare clock and through the work of Lincoln Sander, we managed to convince the potential donor to donate it to the Historical Society to get a tax write-off. So we have been able to acquire things like that, which are just remarkable and very enjoyable.

As another example, we recovered the account book of an 18th century furniture maker by the name of Alexander Bryan. He had made a six-board chest. We managed to purchase that from somebody up in New York State. And that was something else that was made up in the north end of town, and was part of the furniture that this guy made in the 1760's, but it is a documented piece from him. We have that over in the Matthew Curtis house where we display some of the furniture and the larger artifacts that are not easily put in this office, since we don't want to take up room in the vault. We want them out on display. So we have pieces like that. Things that were done, such as 18th century furniture that was made in Newtown, and we can say this is an example of the type of thing that was done here in the 18th century.

Just recently John Renjilian has been able to salvage two spinning wheels from the American Textile Museum that was going out of business up in Lowell, Massachusetts. They were both signed, Sanford. Sanford lived in the house just on the other side of Route 84 where Faith Gulick lived until just recently [68 Church Hill Road, Newtown]. The Sanfords were wheelwrights, which means they made spinning wheels. Well, we've now got three or four examples of these that John's researching. So we can study that and determine what types of manufacturing methods and so forth they had used to see if we can apply those to unsigned examples elsewhere. So that has been tremendously exciting, and as I said we have a collection of three. Signed spinning wheels are rare anyway, but to have three of them with which we can now look at for common elements is important.

I know when Jack DeStories has an auction, he will let you know if there is something Newtown connected. You also look on eBay. You go to ephemera shows. Maybe you can tell me just a little bit about that and maybe a few of the things that you have acquired.

Yes, Jack and Rosie DeStories have been very important to us. Jack served on the board of the Historical Society for a while, but he has also been available as a resource to us for many years. He runs the Fairfield Auctions, now in Monroe. He has also been able to steer some things that are typically Newtown to us, because he is a fellow that knows who has this stuff and when it is going to be on the auction block. And very often Rosie is the auctioneer, so she makes sure that we know that it is there and when it is coming up.

A few years ago, for example, there was material related to the Grand Army of the Republic that had been discovered in a building down in Sandy Hook. [Grand

Army of the Republic] was a Civil War veterans association that formed in the 1870s here in Newtown. It included material that was specific to William Sniffen, who enlisted out of Stratford, but ultimately ended up becoming a jeweler and watchmaker up here in Sandy Hook. And this was his stuff that apparently had been put up in the attic and forgotten, and then later rediscovered and was going to be auctioned off. Well, with the backing of several friends in town, we were able to scrape up enough money that we felt we could put in serious bids on this material. And Rosie let it be known that this was going to the Historical Society, which was nice of her. And for a couple of thousand dollars we managed to recover Sniffen's GAR hat, his holster, unfortunately the pistol wasn't still in it, and several other things that had belonged to him, both during the war and afterwards. So, they've been a great help in recovering some things that would be lost, being sold outside the town. So, yes, that has been very helpful. Jack has been very helpful in terms of putting stuff aside.

I am constantly looking at eBay and all kinds of things come up. I managed to find document material belonging to the Johnson family, for example. I don't know how it got out into the rest of the world, because I don't always know who the person is that is selling the material, so I can't ask questions in terms of from where it came. But very often we get this stuff and also save that.

I have been always looking for photographs and postcards that relate directly to the town's history. And I've got several dealers now that I know on eBay who will very often let me know ahead of time, sometimes giving me first refusal and sometimes just making sure that I know it is going to be auctioned and when. So, yes, there is this constant search for material. Now with the Internet, and that has added a whole new dimension to what you can do in terms of getting access to local history material. The Internet has given me access to make contact with different people that I normally would not have known about, and they wouldn't have known about me to recover and save historic materials. A good example of that are the papers that belonged to Arthur Twining Hadley, president of Yale who had a summerhouse off of Route 34 here in Newtown, and was kind of an important figure, even in town, although he was up here primarily during the summer only with other members of the family.

There was a scrapbook, for example, that belonged to him and to the rest of the family that included personal photographs and comments. And a guest book that they had all their guests sign. It was a virtual who's who of intellectuals from the northeast here. Once I bought a second [album], the guy who had the material got in touch with me. They had apparently bought a couple of cartons of material from the sisters who were breaking up the estate. And, in the process of doing that he recognized there was material in there that would not have been an interest to the general public. He found a lot of letters of famous people during the time period with their signatures on it that he sold separately as individual pieces. But the other stuff that he had like maps that had been drawn by Hadley and his sons that related to the immediate area, he put that aside and some of that stuff he brought down and just donated to us. So that is why the Internet was important from that standpoint. It put me in contact with him and once we started a correspondence,

other things started to flow out in addition to the photograph albums, which we purchased and added to the collection that was here.

And Troque. Was that the game that you discovered through the Internet that related to Newtown?

Yes. I was doing research on James Brunot. Brunot was a resident of Newtown when he developed the game of Scrabble. He didn't invent it, but he developed it. He was responsible for the name Scrabble and popularizing it. In fact, it was because of him that it became a nation-wide fad back in 1952. He literally made his fortune on that. He spent the rest of his life working on other schemes hoping to hit that same streak of success that he had had with Scrabble. One of the games that I found that he had unsuccessfully marketed was Troque. Again, in my scanning of eBay and the Internet I found one being offered for sale. I had never even heard of the game beforehand. I mean it was only through my research for Brunot that indicated this was something he tried and had not been terribly successful with. But I managed to find a copy of it. And once that was done and I had published that in the newsletter, a woman from the other side of town found a copy of Troque up in her attic, a different edition, a later one. It turns out it was produced much longer than I thought it had been, by several years. And this was a later edition. The first one had been done in wood; this one is done in plastic. So we've had several of them come to us as examples of some of his entrepreneurship. His wife raised sheep, especially Merino sheep. She had a weathervane of a Merino sheep. It was really quite valuable, and she donated it to the historical society and that's on display at the Matthew Curtiss house. So all of this is kind of tied together. I desperately want to find enough people who would be willing to try to hold a Troque tournament here in Newtown and publicize that venture.

What have you enjoyed most in your role as town historian?

Oh boy.

You can think about that one and we can start off next time if you want to.

Yes. But let me get a preliminary start to that. The people that I meet, and the people that are willing to open their houses to me. I found one of the things that has always surprised me is that I've had invitations from a number of people to come in and see what their old house looks like. And that's been great, because I've been able to tour houses that I never would have seen otherwise. And throughout the town itself, looking for commonalities in architectural styles. And the people themselves who move into a house like this are delightful. They are interested in the history, obviously, because they have a vested interest in it now. That has been one of the most enjoyable aspects of this. Aside from the natural high of discovery, which comes with the research, is making contact with the people in the community who share that type of interest.

It has given me access to things like town records that I probably wouldn't have had access to otherwise. For example, there are laws that have closed birth records that are eighty years and younger. This is primarily a move against people who are looking for birth parents and biological parents, who were adopted. So, the state legislature closed that down. Well, the fact that I'm the town historian means I have access to that material. So another side benefit of becoming town historian is the fact that yes, I do have access to material that would normally be closed to the general public.

What do you think your biggest contribution has been as town historian?

That's an extremely difficult question to answer. My biggest contribution, I've always felt it is what I've written. It is put in an area where hopefully it will be preserved. So that's why I consider it my biggest contribution. There are smaller contributions like heading the tercentennial. It was not only a tremendous amount of fun, but we had a truly extraordinary committee that included most of the people in town who were natural leaders, all the way from Julia Wasserman down to the presidents of the Newtown Savings Bank, to name just two of them. That was the most incredible committee I had ever worked with, because whenever something had to be done, somebody said, "I'll do it," and they did it. Cindy Simon was our secretary and since she was the town clerk, we had her skills available to us. As I said, it was one of the nicest committees to work with, because I didn't have to do much but coordinate what was going on and the energy of these people just carried it forward. The rest of the commission had done most of the grunt work, but I like to think that I had sense enough to put those guys together.

Speaking of your publications, I know we are going to have a bibliography at the end of this oral history, but can you give me an idea of how many books [you've written], and a guestimate of how many essays.

I think I've done fourteen or fifteen books. And then I have done a number of monographs, eight or nine of those, especially the biographical monographs like the ones on Judge Edmond and Mary Hawley. And I've done essays for a number of organizations, a number of different groups, specifically historical societies. I've done probably about 120 essays for the *Rooster's Crow* dealing most specifically with Newtown history or directly related to Newtown history. I've also done six or seven of those types of essays for the Easton Historical Society newsletter, the *Schoolhouse Sentinel*. I helped out Brookfield with a couple of essays up there. I also have been active in the field of numismatics, which is probably a subject for another session. Especially in the area of Chinese numismatics, and so I have published five or six papers on obscure aspects of Chinese numismatics, including one on the coinage of the San Fan Rebellion. That probably is not going to rank as a Pulitzer Prize winner. But it comes with basically the same impetuous and the same stimulus as trying to get this information once I had it to get it out. I had identified hitherto two unknown mints based on calligraphic varieties on the coins. So that was just another sidebar into another area. I had been active in the

American Numismatics Society for a number of years. I served as a chairman of the East Asian Coinage Committee, so I had my connections down there and had access to their collection, which is the richest collection of Chinese coins outside of China. It is probably only topped now by the Shanghai Museum.

That's in New York. The American Numismatic Society used to be on Audubon Terrace when I was working there. I didn't work there formally; I mean as a volunteer. That was up on 155th Street and Broadway. They have now moved downtown; they are down on Varick Street.

I had one more question, if you feel comfortable talking about it. It's a conundrum that probably a number of historical organizations face. We talked at one time about how something would come into your notice, your office, or someone would call you on the phone and let you know they had a donation. And here you are as the representative of the town—you are the official town historian, and yet, you are also closely tied to and a representative of the Newtown Historical Society. Here is this donation that possibly has monetary value. Tell me how you worked that out.

When we started getting one or two contributions that did have monetary value, the question was, what was my jurisdiction? Well, I'm a town officer, so obviously the town is one of them, but I've also served as president, and I've been vice president forever of the Newtown Historical Society, so as a result does this donation that has been given to the town belong to the Town of Newtown or the Historical Society. Now, in the past, generally, the town officials have been perfectly happy to have the Historical Society take care of that stuff and curate it, But now that you have an official town historian, the question as to where it belonged was one that I worked out ultimately with Pat Llodra, just recently the First Selectman of Newtown. We sat down and worked out a system whereby I would accept the donation if they were willing to allow the Historical Society to be the keeper of it, I would curate it into this particular collection If they wanted it to belong to the town, I, as a town agent, would curate it for the town and so designate on any records that we had here. So we had worked out a system whereby the donation would be given to a specific organization, either the town or the Historical Society and that jurisdiction would be clearly drawn up in the accession papers. The problem became apparent only when people started talking about monetary value.

I never considered the monetary value of these artifacts aside from possibly a response to a donor or something. To me they were historical artifacts that were of value because of their historic importance and the information they would give us concerning the town. Even the Adams material we had, which was worth a considerable amount of money. I steered that to the Historical Society so that it was in their purview. And Pat agreed and I'm hoping every other First Selectman in town would also agree and the legislative council that this would be something that the town historian would be responsible for curating and taking care of, so you have one person responsible for that. We'll see. It was only then that I felt that I should talk to Pat. She also consulted with the lawyer we have on retainer here for the

town, and he drafted an official letter from the First Selectman of the Town of Newtown, which we have on file that explains that relationship.

Faith Gulick had always been our accessions chairman since the 70s, and she had seen to write the thank you notes, acknowledging the donation, acknowledging its value as the owner had designated, and gone through those formalities. As she became ill and was incapable of continuing that it fell more and more on me. And we started using some of the standard documents that were available, Deed of Gift that sort of thing—some of the legal terms that transferred more clearly the ownership to us. So yes, what has happened is we have been developing over time what has now become standard best practices for accessions. So we are doing it in a legally logical way of determining exactly where the ownership responsibility lies.

And the proviso, which is very important. The proviso that this material does not have to remain with the Historical Society if it is deemed to be not compatible with the rest of the collection. So we can sell it, provided the money is used for further acquisitions.

Has that ever been a sticky point in a donation that you recall?

I can't think of one. We've got things that just didn't fit with our collection. In fact the couch you are sitting on is one of them. It is a Second Empire couch, circa 1840.

~ Importance of Writing Books and Essays,
Time Travel, and Unflagging Pursuit of History ~

So, we left off talking about what you enjoyed most as town historian. Have you had a chance to give a little thought to that?

I think so. Probably the most enjoyable thing is to meet with people who have been influential in town, and to get to know them and be able to engage them in conversation. That includes an oral history, or things that they were interested in with regard to their own house, for example, that I might not have [otherwise] had a chance to meet and talk to them and get to know them a little bit.

The other thing that is exciting is the artifacts that come my way, as I mentioned earlier. I've become kind of lightning rod for Newtown history. So when people are cleaning out an estate or whatever and may have something with historical significance, they'll get in touch with me and it has led to a string of fascinating recoveries for the town. Things like the sign for Baldwin and Beers, which is over your head. The panels, for example, that have carvings on them done probably by some young adolescent that came out of a house that burned over in the east side of town. So the discovery of things like that are rich and exciting and that is probably what has kept me at this as long as it has. And also people coming forward with things like journals and diaries, which have given me an unprecedented opportunity to be able to get inside the mind of somebody who was

living here a hundred, two hundred years ago. And so that in itself is also exciting. Generally these types of discoveries are their own type of emotional high. So that is the thing that drives you. It is like anything that is addictive. You can't get enough of it.

What do you feel some of your biggest contributions have been?

Well, I suppose the biggest contribution would be the ability to write and get published in the newsletter of the Historical Society, *The Rooster's Crow*. What I had hoped to do is get the results of the research and the little stories I found and that sort of thing down on paper so that they would be available to future generations. They wouldn't have to go through all the work that I went through to research a particular institution or a particular individual in town who was important historically. To get that organized and into written form so that it is available to people, and indexed, or whatever else is necessary so people can gain access to it. I consider that to probably be the main contribution of any town historian. So it is a matter of digging the history out and then presenting it.

I think with the last Arcadia book, *Newtown Notables*, my count was up to about fifteen volumes in books, plus a series of eight or ten short monographs. These would be biographical monographs like the one I did on Mary Hawley and on Judge William Edmond. Or on a topic in town like Newtown education, which we turned into another monograph. I had tried to turn out five essays a year that would go into each issue of *The Rooster's Crow*. They were substantial essays; it was a little more than just an historical note. It has to be about 125 or 130 that were done over time. Some of them were collected in the *Mosaic of Newtown's History* that we did for the tercentennial. So there are about fifty-five of them that are incorporated there and are indexed and are now available to the general public. I would hope that sometime in the future some of the other essays that didn't get into that volume that were written afterwards and are considered valuable could also be published under a single cover and made available.

And of course, your editing the oral history was a large project.

Yes, and my part of that really was more coming up with footnotes to add some of the historical background of the people we were interviewing, the incidents that these people were telling us about. And occasional correction where their memory was a little faulty or a little off. They remembered things a little differently than what was reported. We threw that in as an alternative correction, but that was primarily my job to supply fact where it was needed to the narratives that they were giving us.

Also, the beauty of those three volumes that we did was the fact that because they were indexed, it meant that you could find topics, or you could find people that you might be researching. You go to the index and very quickly you can find out if somebody that we had interviewed had in fact remembered that individual or had known things about them that we didn't know before. So you gain access to

their memories much more readily by the index and footnoting process that we went through to do that. I think that is where what we did as an oral history stands above what a lot of other people have done.

This might just tie in with all of your writing: What do you hope to leave Newtown from your many years as Town Historian?

I just mentioned the writings. Beyond that I have also purchased material when it has become available through auctions and that sort of thing. That, if it hasn't already been donated to the Historical Society and put on file, it will be. So that stuff I will also leave as part of my legacy. There are a few things that I've managed to acquire at auction that I want to study and play with at home first, and then I'll turn them over to the proper authorities so they can be made available to other people. The other contribution is the fact that I've been able to recover aspects of Newtown's history and make those discoveries available. First, bring them to people's attention, because very often something we've done, like the milestones we found up on Currituck Road are picked up by *The Newtown Bee,* and that information is then disseminated over a larger area. But recovering the artifacts has been the other thing that has been a major contribution.

Can you give me some examples of the types of artifacts that you have purchased yourself over the years and were excited about?

There was a photograph album that I just acquired recently that had come on the market and fortunately the auctioneer knew me and got in touch and told me he had this material. This was an album that had been done of the war maneuvers here, that centered in Newtown in 1912. There was a full pitch battle to try to take over the town and move onto New York. This was a war game situation, essentially, before the days of the TV and the video games.

But with these photographs there was a series of negatives that were also included in there with subjects that we didn't have before. Especially things like the aircraft that were used during those maneuvers, I've had a ball going back through those, examining the photographs very carefully, and matching them against the reportage in the *New York Times,* and some of the other papers including *The Newtown Bee*. So that's the type of thing I do with those. I'm also an avid collector of postcards. And the postcard images themselves show buildings, some of which no longer exist in Newtown or are changed almost to the point where they are no longer recognizable. I've collected about 700 postcards for Newtown alone. And I have been treating that as a private collection. These are things I bought with my own money. My executor will be instructed to make sure that they get to the Historical Society for ultimate reference. But again, I am enjoying playing with the postcard images, and I also do that for some of the surrounding towns.

What actually brought you to Newtown?

The most immediate reason for moving to Newtown was that I was priced out of my hometown, which is Easton. At the time when I was starting to look for a house, they were so expensive in Easton, I couldn't afford to move back to my hometown. At that point Newtown was more affordable than it is even now. So we started looking up in this area and ultimately ended up settling here back in 1970. There were several reasons for moving north, but the housing market was a thing that led us into the community. The other was my love of the community itself.

Because Newtown is an unusual town in the fact that it has its core of townspeople. It is a suburban town and the people use it as a bedroom community, but there is a core of people who have lived here, some of them for all of their lives, who are dedicated to Newtown, and make Newtown what it is. And it is that community that creates something that is relatively rare in this day and age, and that's a community that has some cohesion and exists as a community. People know each other and help each other. And that part I value tremendously—the type of people that are found up in this area.

In addition, it had a history that dovetailed with the surrounding towns, including Easton and Redding. And I had done work in local history in Easton. I was on the first charter board of directors for the Easton Historical Society down there for many years and became vice president of the Society for many years. And so as a result, this was a logical extension of my interest in what I was discovering in Easton. I was teaching a course in local history [at Joel Barlow High School in Redding], which applied to Easton and Redding. Since we were a regional high school between those two towns, it was logical that the information I was picking up to teach that course and was constantly making discoveries for, would also dovetail with what was going on here in Newtown and make me more valuable to Newtown as a resource, because I had access to this type of information. So that was the thing that basically brought me up here. A great community, at that point affordable housing, and you also had a rich history. It had a history that was not directly tied to a place like Bridgeport. And you had lots of documentation, good state of preservation up here, so it just made it an ideal town for somebody like myself with my proclivities towards local history to move into. So those are the primary reasons we moved up here.

Is there any area of the town's history or region of the town that you just haven't had the time to research and that you hope someone else will pursue?

Yes. I've often wondered what I would do when I ran out of topics to research, and I found as time goes on there is no shortage of topics. Every time I think I've got it, it generates a new topic and on I go into a new area. There are a number of areas, a lot of them tied up with the histories of old houses. Some of those houses, in going through the land records I've come on by accident, made notes about, but they definitely need more research, more information needs to be

Dan Cruson offers a tour of the Village Cemetery, an event sponsored by the Newtown Historical Society. (photo courtesy: *The Newtown Bee*)

pulled out about not only the old houses themselves, but also the people who lived in them. So yes, that is an unfinished part of the project, and it is ongoing. It is probably forever. I need to go into negotiations with God to let me finish my job here first before I die.

Regardless, even if I have another lifetime, I would never be able to do it all. But it is primarily in areas like that, and little things that I've discovered by accident. For example, just recently, I came on some mention in some old *Newtown Bee's* that were not part of Hilda Ferris's index, the *Newtown Bees* from 1889, 1890 and 1891. There was a small group called the Whatnots, which was a literary society of young people down in Hattertown. It was chartered in 1888 and I was able to follow through the issues of *The Bee*, because they carefully reported their meetings and what they were doing, the books they were discussing, the games they played. It was a big social activity for the southern part of town. And this was completely unknown to me before I happened to chance on that one article of their fourth meeting, in which they go into some details of what they were doing. So that opened up a whole new area that we knew nothing about concerning Hattertown. So, yes, there are things like that that need to be researched that I would hope to be able to have access to before I am no longer capable of doing it.

Is there any section of town that you feel hasn't really been turned over very much or well, or do you feel that has pretty much been covered?

The overview—when we were doing a history of the school districts, we meant to cover most areas of town to a greater or lesser degree. Some more, because of the interest they had like Hattertown, for example, because of its early industrial appeal, which later died out and never did pass the transition into the Industrial Revolution. We have good information on that. Some areas of Sandy Hook are better researched than others. So, yes, there are always little outlying areas in town that probably have stories to tell and this is an area that I want to discover. But generally, there is no area of town that has been neglected.

You are so familiar with Newtown's history, is there a time you would like to go back and visit if it were possible?

The problem with a question of where I would like to visit if I had my own time machine is a difficult one. There are so many areas of town I would like to see what they looked like back in the mid-19th century that I could pick almost any area and try to pick out one that is more important to me. If I had only a choice of one I would like to go to, it would be a very difficult if not impossible question to answer.

Where I would really like to go back—and just give me a half hour, is the Putnam encampment. After spending twelve years involved in historical research and archeology over there, we have reconstructed what we think the camp looked like, a lot about their lifestyle, and so forth. And still we have questions of the placement of buildings. I would like to go back to, say, January of 1778 and just walk around the camp. Give me a half hour just so I could see what was actually there. I would like to see if our reconstruction was accurate, and how accurate it was. I have great faith in the fact that we got the outline correct. Now the question is, I would like to go back and see how it sits. So I have a few sites like that. None as spectacular as Putnam Park, but to answer your question, that is probably the place I would like to go back to more than anything else.

Is it frustrating as a historian not to know absolutely some things like exactly how the winter encampment was set up?

Yes, but you have to realize that drives the energy level that I need to be able to go out and find the answers to those questions. So the questions themselves are not really annoying or not uncomfortable questions. The fact is, it is motivation to go out and to find the answers. And it's its own excitement. So the questions themselves rather than being a curse are actually a blessing in the fact that they have led me into so many areas, and will continue to lead me, I hope, into other areas of research.

So here's a big one. Who are two or three people from Newtown's history that you would have liked to have met and what would you have talked with them about?

That's a difficult question because there are a lot of people who I would love to have interviewed or sat down and talked with at one time or another. I think the top of the list would be Judge William Edmond because he was involved in national politics, because he knew President John Adams, was in Washington when it was first built and when they moved the national capitol there, and knew so much about national history as well as the history of this area. That would be one I would like to spend a couple of days talking to.

Ezra Johnson. I would like to talk to him about more specific questions, but he's written a great deal and made available a great deal of the town's history already, so that imperative is not as high as it would be for someone like Judge Edmond.

Possibly Mary Hawley, but her life was such that it would be very difficult to hold a conversation with her, especially because there were areas of what was scandal in her day, even though it isn't today, [those] would be an impediment to my asking questions that I really want to get answers to. So there are things like that. How many do you want?

That is three, but if you think of a few more off hand as they pop into your head…?

Another one is a fellow who is not well known in town is Abijah Merritt. He lived down in Sandy Hook and he was involved in manufacturing down there. He had a mill along the Pootatuck River. But his family was large. It intermarried with the Johnson family, and members of the family also moved to Medina, New York, and they became kind of a sister town to us for both members of the Merritt and the Johnson families moving back and forth. I would really love to have an opportunity to talk to him, because he would give me a perspective on Sandy Hook that I don't have.

William B. Glover probably would be another individual, especially for Sandy Hook. His house, although badly gutted, is still down there at the intersection of Washington and Riverside Road. He was a wealthy individual. I would love to know where he got his money. I would love to be able to talk to him about the things that he financed down there, like the rubber factories. He was heavily involved in both of them. He was also intimately involved in the Red Brick Store, I have all kinds of questions I would love to ask him about the way those buildings had been built and the way they looked a hundred or a hundred-fifty years ago. So that is another one.

I can pick some other people from different areas of town that I would like, because they would have localized knowledge. The ones I mentioned are biggies.

When you wrote your book on the legendary locals, did that spark any thoughts: Wow, I really wished I could have talked to him or her, too?

No. I never had a moment with that particular book, which was the last one I did. A lot of that material I was just gathering together. I already had that material and it had been incorporated in other things like newsletter essays, and what I was

basically doing was pulling it together so that I had a quick sketch. There wasn't a lot of additional research that needed to be done; there was for a few men and women, but not many. So, no, that didn't generate the type of excitement and further research needed and sorts of questions that I come up with in writing the other material that I had. And it was primarily a gimmick, on the part of Arcadia Press. It was looking for people to put together lists and sketches of legendary locals that hopefully had descendants living in Newtown. If an ancestor is mentioned in the book, that would increase sales. I don't know whether it worked out the way they had intended or not, but they called me specifically because I had already done four other books. Three other books with Arcadia and two other books with the History Press, which is now a subsidiary of Arcadia. So they were familiar with the type of work that I had done, and that is how I got involved in the last volume. But as I said, it was more of a gathering together and summary of previous research.

With that book were you able to decide who would be included or was there some format you had to follow for Arcadia?

No. I had pretty much the editorial freedom I needed and would have demanded, as to who to include. My own guidelines included people, especially those that were no longer with us, that had done important things for the town or had made an important mark on the town. They were interested and they told me [to include] younger people, many of them are still alive, so that that pool of potential buyers would increase. To a certain extent I resisted that. Most of what I was dealing with was people who were important to Newtown regardless of when they lived, but focusing on those people who had already passed away. And you couldn't go ask them what they had done. I considered those people to be more valuable than the more recent. Arcadia is a business and one to sell books.

We talked a little bit about this, but maybe this is a good time to go into it. I was wondering about the people, the organizations, events, anniversaries, and the institutions that prompted you to be curious enough about them or that actually approached you to write a history about them. And how that all came about for some of the works that turned into books for you, or monographs?

Yes, it all started, I think, with Curtis Packaging. Back in 1995 they were undergoing their 150th anniversary. I had been talking to Don Droppo, Sr. He was, at that point, the head of the corporation, and I suggested I turn out a long essay on the history of Curtis Packaging that they could use this with other things in their reception for the celebration of their anniversary. And so what happed was, I went out and did a rather involved history of Curtis Packaging. Well, that led to other people who were having anniversaries wanting the same type of treatment. Newtown Savings Bank was a big one, and I had complete access to all of their records and was able to put together a history of the bank along with some of the other savings institutions here in town. This was primarily for their 150th anniversary in 1995. That was a much more involved sort of thing than the history of Curtis

Packaging. That became a hardbound book with softbound copies also that would go to the corporators and other people who were part of the bank or who wanted copies.

It then spread to other areas. For example, the Men's Literary and Social Club of Newtown Street had approached me back in 1993-94, and they were interested in an historic sketch of their organization because it was a holdover from the Victorian era. It was a men's club limited to twenty people who met once a month for ten months of the year. During their meetings one individual would be the designated host; he supplied dinner and cigars, which I'm sorry we lost. Another member would be designated the essayist; he was to provide the evening's intellectual stimulation and entertainment. Very often he would be speaking, himself, or would find somebody in the area who might be of interest and bring him into speak. Well, they wanted to document that for their hundredth anniversary. I turned out a monograph on them, and then a couple years later they actually asked me to join the group. So, I got firsthand knowledge in addition to what I researched and preserved in terms of their history. So a lot of things that I had written followed along those lines.

Parallel to that, for example, down in Easton I was contacted by a woman I had known for a long time, especially in connection with the Easton Historical Society. She was interested in Everett Road down there; Everett was her husband's name [and] she was part of the Everett family. She wanted a history of Everett Road. And of course, assuming it would probably be eighteen, nineteen, twenty pages maybe, I agreed. Well about nine months later—that is just about right; that would be a gestation period of this particular book—it turned out I was 130-140 pages in. It turned out to be a hardbound volume that she managed to get published and it covers the entire area of Stratford West Woods, which was a section of Easton that had started as part of Stratford. And it had its own history independent of Easton, itself. And so as a result I ended up documenting this section of town, which was poorly understood from the standpoint of those who were interested in Easton's history. The people in the northeast corner, those people were different. They did business in Stepney, and surrounding towns, whereas most of the people in Easton were oriented towards Fairfield or Bridgeport. That was one of the cases that I had gotten carried away with. But in the process, we documented a section of town, which is adjacent to Newtown in the south side and interacted with us up here.

So, yes, commemoration of organizations and businesses were one of the things that I did. It became kind of a mainstay of what I was doing.

A lot of people who were on the board of the library were familiar with what I had done there in the bank history. And so as a result, we were involved in a conversation about the 75th anniversary of the Cyrenius H. Booth Library, and its history up through the directorship of Janet Woycik. We were going to do a small monograph, a small pamphlet of the history of the library. It turned out that the subject was fascinating. I found out about other libraries in town, like Sandy Hook and one down in Zoar. They were short-lived in some respect, but also served a library function from about the 1870s on. And so what happened was I got more deeply and deeply involved, and came out again with not a pamphlet but a book.

Then they published what I called *The Cyrenius H. Booth Library & Earlier Reading Institutions: A History*—a history of the desire to have books, to circulate them, and have people read and develop a literate society. Again, it was another anniversary.

Have you ever come across a topic that you are researching, say for an essay or something, and you realize it could be a huge thing, such as a book. Do you stop yourself? Or does your curiosity make you go on?

I have never been able to stop myself when I am doing that type of research. And every so often what I would do is, if I turned out an essay for *The Rooster's Crow* explaining something in outline, I very often collected notes much more widely on the topic or the idea that someday I'll come back to it. And in some cases I have done that. But as I said, always in any of the essays that I've written there is much more material that could turn into a larger publication. But somebody else can do that. They can borrow my notes and go to town.

In this article that Curtiss Clark wrote, there are a couple of really interesting quotes that he included that you said. One is, "I can look at things you are publishing now in The Bee *and see precedence for this in the near past. And also in some cases going back one hundred years." That was 1994.*

It is true of all history. Nothing is ever completely new. It has all happened before in one form or another. And doing local history I become acutely aware of that. That is what goes back to what I had mentioned at the beginning of our interview, going back to Cicero's quote, "Those who do not learn from history is living the life of a child forever." That type of naïveté comes from not having any knowledge of what went on in the past. Because when you have that knowledge, you begin to realize that yeah, this has happened before, people have had this similar problem. Not only does that make you wise, but you can find possible solutions that were used or possible failures that were embarked upon by your forebearers, and avoid the problems and adopt the things that were successful. So, as a result, yes. The fact that you are seeing this not for the first time as something new, but as something that's been around and has been dealt with before is one of the great values of local history.

And you continue, too. "Dan Cruson, believes an understanding of history also adds a reassuring perspective to the many passing crises in communities like Newtown." So, at that point in time, this town had seen the shootout in Sandy Hook, Fairfield Hills Mental Hospital come about, the prison come in, and subsequently, of course, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. So, I wonder if you could just give some perspective.

Knowing that your forebearers had faced similar problems is always reassuring. Because they somehow dealt with it and solved the problem or learned to live with it. They had already faced this and you can benefit by their experience. It also enables you to come to a deeper understanding of your community. For

example, the so-called Hell's Angels shootout in 1975 was one of those that took place down in Sandy Hook, and at the time it was the biggest thing that had ever hit Newtown. Well, we'd already known the fact that there had been other shootouts down in Sandy Hook. That was not the first. In fact, I had a letter from one of Hawley Warner's uncles that described a shootout that was done there back in the 1890s. And it involved a couple of guys who had broken into the Red Brick Store and were in the process of kind of wandering down the street. Eventually they would have gone down to the depot, which at that point was on the lower end of Glen Road, and ridden a boxcar out of town. But the local community had gotten together, including Mike Lynch and Sam Bull who ran the drugstore down there, and Lynch was involved with the little tavern that was under the Sandy Hook Hotel. And what they ended up doing was getting their squirrel guns and they shot them but didn't kill them, but they dropped both guys. They ultimately gave them to the sheriff who took them down to Bridgeport, and they were tried and eventually convicted. The point was that that shootout that was down there, I began to realize, was part of something that was going on all over the United States. We talk about the Wild West, people shooting each other up on the main streets. It wasn't quite that bad. We know a lot more about the west, but it wasn't that different than Sandy Hook, for crying out loud, where one of the robbers that gone into the Red Brick Store had a pistol in his pocket. So, as I said, understanding that this had been dealt with before, means that you put it into some kind of perspective and that perspective is reassuring.

When the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting happened, I remember actually standing across the street from where we are sitting right now in your office in Edmond Town Hall, and I remember you saying to me, "It will take a generation." Maybe you could explain that.

The closest thing we had to a unique situation was the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. That was, especially in its magnitude, unprecedented for us. It had happened elsewhere in the United States and has happened since then, so we have a national perspective on the fact that yes, this is a persistent problem, but we are dealing with it and we are also looking at other areas, other places where those shootings have occurred and are starting to ask questions about how can we possibly solve this problem, keep it from happening again. So from that standpoint, the one incident is a little different than what we were just talking about, like the shootouts in the streets.

The problem in places like Sandy Hook is the fact that it was traumatic, obviously, on the children that were in the building at the time. And the parents, for obvious reasons. The fact remains is that those kids who experienced that, who were in the first grade, the classmates of the kids that were killed, they are going to bear the scars of that probably for the rest of their life. Most of them will manage and come to grips with it and deal with it, but it will be there. What is going to happen as time goes on, however, those first graders go into the middle school, the intermediate school, and then the high school and move away from the elementary school environment, and the pain is no longer severe. In other words, it's

attenuated. It has actually diminished over time, never fully getting rid of it. It is always there. But it isn't until the next generation comes along that did not experience that first hand, but will understand it as part of their history, that enables us to heal the ongoing wounds that the community feels. So it is only at that point when some time has gone by, it doesn't cure the problem completely. It doesn't cure the hurt. The hurt will always be there, especially with those people who were closely associated with it. But it will diminish, and it will become manageable for the community, especially. Time has to pass before the healing can be affected.

I just find that so interesting, because when I wrote about true historical crime in Newtown, I loved reading about that stuff. It was horrible but it didn't have a reality for me. It was obviously long before the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, and things like that were not part of my experience here in this community. So there was some novel quality, a sense of fictional quality. But it was part of our history and I found it fascinating.

It is like realizing that the wild and wooly west had its counterpart here in the east. And that gives you a whole new perspective on the types of crimes that have been committed in the last century, and it reflects on what goes on now.

I don't know if you have a comment about this but back to the whole idea of the most recent traumatic events, or even something like having the prison in town. As town historian, what type of impact do you feel that type of thing has on a town and its history? Or are we too close in time to judge something like that?

Things like the Garner prison, to a great extent we are too close to it to adequately judge. Let's go back a little further. As you are talking about Fairfield Hills as a mental hospital up here, it was gut-wrenching. There were town meetings about it back in the late 1920s and early 1930s when they were building it. As we continued to live with it over the course of the years, we accommodated that. And we got used to the fact that the hospital was here, and it was not big deal after a while. Until it closed, and then they had to try to decide what to do with the campus. And that is a whole other set of problems. But the fact remains that we become familiar with Fairfield Hills and we come to accept it. And again, that is something that takes time for us to adapt to.

Well, the community also changed because of Fairfield Hills, even though it was a self-contained entity with its own telephone exchange, its own power plant, its own everything. I recall someone we interviewed talking about the doctors from different countries, and probably nurses, too, who were at Fairfield Hills; they started an international club here, in town. So there was this introduction, I gather, of international people that weren't here before. Probably other things were influenced in town by the people who came here to work at Fairfield Hills.

Both the people who came here to work and even the patients. As we became familiar with the workings of the hospital itself, and with incidents like you

mentioned, forming a club, it broadened the interests, especially of patients. That is how we learned to get along with Fairfield Hills and learned to deal with it. Something that comes only with time. That was some of the reasons why I made the comment about the shooting: It will take us a generation to get over that, just as it took a generation for us to get used to Fairfield Hills. And it is taking another generation to get used to the absence of Fairfield Hills. Because we don't know exactly how to handle the ruins that we have up there. Some are being taken down, some are being transformed into other things. But again, it is going to take us a generation before we get used to the fact that piece of property is up there and can be used for passive and active recreation. So again, another generation.

Did [residents] actually leave the campus and come to town events?

It depends on what their malady was, what their illness was. Some of them, if they were having severe problems dealing with social situations, could not be left to wander around. But there were others who were really fairly good. Remember they also handled cases of addiction, alcohol specifically. Those patients would intermingle, would go into town occasionally. But in addition, the people who were part of the staff, the nurses, many of them lived in town. There were nurses' quarters on the campus. But especially people who were supplying food service, and the rest of that, were living in the town. That was the other link for Fairfield Hills to the community of Newtown—through the services personnel, the people who were actually working there. So there was interaction on many different levels.

I remember reading that most of the town was opposed to Fairfield Hills coming in, with the exception of farmers and the young people in the community, because the young people were hoping for jobs—it was right around the Depression—and the farmers thought maybe they would sell their land for Fairfield Hills so that they could get out.

I think both of those points are well made. You do have to remember that the initial buildings were built and were opened in 1933, which is the depth of the Depression. And so as a result, it did present some economic opportunities, but it wasn't widespread. There weren't that many farmers up there that could contribute, even if they wanted to, by selling their land to Fairfield Hills. I think there was a group of about eight of them that had that. So that was not a big factor that was involved in the interactions that were there. I think there were job opportunities there, in the support staff. And also they employed medical personnel. That was also part of the operation up there. So yes, as a result, the opposition that we felt in the town meetings in 1928 and 1929 when they were first moving on this, were lowered a bit by the actual experience of having a hospital here and who we learned to get along with.

[Thinking about] my initial impression that the whole town was opposed to Fairfield Hills, I wonder if your experience has shown you that many people tend to see history as more black and white than full of nuances.

That is also typical of people who are ignorant. I go back to what I said before: “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to live the life of a child forever.” And yes, most children see history as black and white. George Washington chopped down a cherry tree with a little hatchet and then couldn’t tell a lie and spilled the beans to his father. Black and white.

The nuances that are there come only with further understanding with going back and learning the history of an institution like Fairfield Hills and dealing with that reality, beginning to see that there are subtleties that are involved there. Especially as people in the community begin to realize that mental illness is not something that chooses poor, rich, or whatever. It is one of those situations that come to almost everybody. And this was a point that Waldo Desmond had made. He was new to town as a physician, and he showed up at that meeting in 1928. Mary Hawley was also present. [Dr. Desmond] got up and spoke to that particular point saying that all of you are going to need the services that this place offers at one time or another in your life. Now that is a much more subtle approach to why a mental hospital is necessary, and what it can do. So as a result, a knowledge of history rounds off your rough edges and turns you into a civilized human being.

Wow, that’s marvelous. Recently there’s been a lot of building in town. There has been a lot of applications for building. There are right now four hundred plus housing units proposed as of February of this year. Do you sense a big change underway for this town?

Not big, no, but there is change, yes. Part of the problem is that Newtown grew at geometric ratios in the post World War II period. It was very quick because we had a lot of open space up here, open land of farmers that were no longer able to make a go of it. Land was becoming available. Therefore the population rose very, very quickly. We are up to about 27,000 I think now, roughly, give or take a thousand. That increase from just about five or six thousand back at the end of the war was dramatic and Newtown has gone through growing pains as a result of that.

The problem with the proposed housing structures that they are getting in now is an attitude of the builders. They are reaching for the maximum number of housing units knowing full well that they are not going to get that. The regulatory agencies are going to put pressure on them to reduce the number. So, you will say, yeah, I want two hundred and sixty housing units here knowing the fact that you are going to get maybe half of that. So the numbers that you had quoted of over four hundred housing units is a little misleading in the fact that this is part of the scare tactic. And then you feel real happy about the fact that they reduced the number and made some of them affordable housing. Yes, it will affect change in the community.

I would say you have to have support for the people who are living here especially those who are renting relatively small units and just beginning their professional lives. And that is going to change the complexion of Newtown’s population, and what they are going to demand from here. In the not too distant future, I can see the coming of fast food places. That is going to be part of some of

the changes that begin to occur. So, yes, there will be change. It won't be as dramatic as it was in two or three years after the Second World War when you started finding these housing developments developing all over town. So in that respect, and especially with the zoning and the regulating agencies that we have in town now, it will mitigate somewhat the rapid growth, the worst growing pains that we could possibly have.

Can you give me a brief description of Newtown pre-war and then a description of Newtown now in 2018? Mostly agrarian, would you say?

Farming was never a very lucrative business here in Newtown. You could raise enough to support yourself, but basically the soil was too rocky and thin. The field structures were too small to allow mass production as you have the agri-businesses in the Midwest. And we couldn't compete with the Midwest. Their soil was very fertile. They could raise much higher crop yields than we could. They had the railroads that could transport to market more easily than it could here. And so as a result, the farmers up here began to find niche markets, or niche areas where they could go. What ultimately developed here were some orchards. People raising apples and other fruit, and dairy farming. Those were the two that were very recently the more lucrative ways of going. But a lot of the farms closed down as the next generation came along and the children didn't want to farm, which required a strong back and a weak mind, according to some farmers I know.

We then went through a phase in the late 19th, early 20th centuries in which this area became kind of a resort community. Active mostly during the summer. People would come up to some of the hotels that were up here, especially those on Main Street. They'd come up by train to get out of the city for a while in the summer and spend a week or two weeks, hiking along the many dirt roads that were here, visiting farms and patting cows on the nose and that sort of bucolic activity that you expect to find and people came up here to look for and experience it. And it was just a nice place to be. And so as a result, a lot of income was generated for locals especially here in the center of town and, to a lesser extent, in Sandy Hook, as a place to go to get out of the city for a while and to spend a weekend. Some of those people also decided to buy cottages up here, so during the summer they could come up on weekends, especially down along Lake Zoar after that was formed in 1919.

A lot of people were looking for affordable housing like I was. Especially right after the war you had men coming back, getting out of the service, who wanted to start their families. They were going to create the baby boom. And also, just started with careers or whatever their jobs were going to be. Many of them moved up into an area here where housing was much more affordable than it was in some of the surrounding towns like Easton, Redding, Weston. That really was the biggest change here, accommodating that larger population.

We were actually a big town so we could handle a lot of that, too. You have to remember this is the fifth largest town in the State of Connecticut with sixty-one square miles. The ones that beat us are not much larger. I think New Milford is a

little bigger, but that is about it. So we had room into which they could expand and handle that population, so it wasn't quite as gut wrenching as we are beginning to fear now. You are seeing a lot of people beginning to look at the proposals, such as the ones you had suggested earlier—some of the housing proposals to bring large numbers of people in—and seeing this as too rapid. It is generating anxiety within the community, no question about it because most of the best land we had for housing has already been used and developed. The problem is, you are going to worse sections of the land, many with problems—wetland problems or pollution problems. With what you found at the turn of the previous century, that is going to be one of the biggest areas of contrast between the two.

It became more of a commuter town in the postwar period, so as a result you found a lot of people who were coming into town to spend the night here sleeping, and then go off to their jobs in the city areas, either down the line, especially in Bridgeport and Stamford.

The core community, which at one time was the main part of the population up here as I alluded to before, has survived but it is under fire from people coming in from outside, expanding the newbie population of Newtown. That is another major change that is going to be felt.

The other thing, too, is the demand for open space. There is a lot of push, for example, to keep the spaces untouched. The Newtown Forest Association and similar institutions survive in the fact that they are able to get large parcels, manage them and keep them open. So one of the things that is going to save Newtown is its attitude towards open space. The more of that they can get either a development

Dan gives a tour of Main Street to students in architecture classes at Newtown High School. (Photo courtesy: *The Newtown Bee*)

easement on it so you can't develop it, or just keep it open for passive recreation on the part of the people who are living here, will enrich Newtown.

How would you describe Newtown today?

I really don't know how to answer that.

Is it in flux now?

It always has been. [It] is a common misconception in history that there was a time in the good ole days when Newtown was as it always has been for evermore—a small community in a Currier and Ives print. That was never the case. Communities are constantly changing, constantly ongoing. It is like the environment itself; the environment is never static. So there is evolution. Animals change, plants change, the whole environment shifts. It is a common misconception of people who are looking at history, especially the popular history, is the fact that well, yeah, there were the good ole days, and then today is just not so good. And that goes back to what you suggested about seeing history as not black and white. That's the black and white view. The good ole days were actually rotten.

In your work as historian, you said, every time you start to scratch the surface you find something else and something else. Where does it end, Dan? And who will continue your work?

Where does it end? It ends when I die. I mean that's the bottom line. There won't be somebody such as myself who is going to step in and devote the amount of time that I have to it. That is just not going to happen. What I'm hoping is there will be several people that will come in that will be interested in researching one area. Their own house, for example. The more people we can recruit to go in and start looking through the land records to piece together the history of the development of their house. That will be carried on by people doing that as a hobby. And people who are doing genealogical work. So it will be carried on, but not at the frenetic pace that I do it.

It's a hobby. Most people who are getting really wrapped up in their own genealogy are just dying to share it with somebody. So I don't think that is going to be a problem. Most people who do this sort of thing are willing to make it available, put it in the library where it can be accessible to other people. That's why people love to get into Ancestry because they can post their ancestors there and they are now available to other people who would be related to you even tenuously. And it will go on. But yes, there is not going to be a prime historian like Ezra Johnson and myself.

When I said, where does it end, I didn't mean your work, but I meant where does the end of discovering history. Is there ever an end?

Never. Because you are constantly making more history. And the point is that as you continue to live in town, the things that happen here you see in the present. Ten years down the road—and that's not a long time—is now being looked at as recent history and enters the stream as that. Now, how people remember those things and how people react to it is going to be determined essentially by what happens next. So as a result, as you go through time, there are other things that will deserve to be researched and we'll go back and we'll look at things like the Hell's Angels shootout. A lot of people remember the story, especially the mythology that was generated around that particular incident. However, there were people that will go back and try to get the truth. What did actually happen down there? And they are doing local history. And that is what I hope some people who have enjoyed or read some of the stuff that I've done would be moved to go on and do.

The Newtown Bee has been an incredible resource for you, I know, and for me, too. When something like that eventually ends, how would that affect the future generation's ability to research what we are seeing now as modern history?

Hopefully it will be documented somewhere.

Where would they go to look?

We do this now. We go to the surrounding daily papers. For example, the *News-Times*, or the *Connecticut Post* in hopes that they would have articles that would at least mention what was going on up here. That would be one area. I am not as sanguine about the preserving nature of digital information, and my reason for that is that we are going to lose our ability to be able to interpret the digital marks that are on our CDs and DVDs. It is going to be more difficult to get at that material. But hopefully there will be people who will make hard copies of a lot of that stuff. And again, like today, when people are cleaning out their attics, I benefit from things that were there, letters and whatnot, that record things that had occurred in the past. I would hope that that would continue. However, the fact that they are no longer teaching handwriting, the fact that people don't take notes on paper, hard copy, is going to diminish our ability to recover, or rediscover what happened in those periods coming up.

Yes, it is a magnificent organization. The most magnificent part about it is that it has such time depth, as it goes back to 1877. And so as a result notes give us a lot more information than we would have otherwise. What's going to happen is, we are going to be at a loss to save some of Newtown's history. It is not going to survive. The stuff, I hope, that's important will as hard copy. I hope we get back to the point of writing letters.

Printing out photographs. People don't do that so much anymore.

True. They are all on their iPhone assuming it is going to last forever. Anybody who has had an iPhone for any length of time knows that doesn't happen.

Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to discuss related to your views of history?

One of the areas that I've gotten fascinated with and has led me to a lot of research and subsequently write about was northern slavery. I've become fascinated with the fact that slavery was prevalent here in the north to a much greater extent than most people thought it was. And I started working on it—I knew that there was a fair slave population in Newtown, and started looking at that as an area of research. That is another one of those things that got entirely out of hand. Before I was finished I had put together a database of slaves in Newtown expanded by what I was able to find in Redding, Easton and Weston, and some of the surrounding towns. So I put together a database of who these slaves were, what happened to them, what was the process of manumitting. We finally abolished slavery in Connecticut in 1848; at that time there were seventeen slaves, all elderly and highly dependent that were still alive. We managed to arrange to manumit those slaves starting back in 1784 when they started passing legislation that would gradually emancipate the slaves as they got to age twenty-four and eventually twenty-one. So, when they got to that age they would no longer be slaves. They'd be free. We handled this with much greater aplomb obviously than some of our surrounding states. A little bit of Newtown centric thinking here.

I think the thing that I was fascinated by even more than just the discovery of slaves here in the north was the fact that many of them had become members of the community. Some of them had become substantial members, like Cato Freedom, or Cato Platt as he was known back then. His master was Moses Platt.

He was a proud man. He was illiterate. Three generations of his family lived over on Sherman Street. And he was manumitted in 1783 and within a year he purchased an acre-and-a-half of ground and built a house that is still there. The fun part of that family was the fact that they'd become fairly prominent. When I finally found the records for the old Baptist Church that used to be down by Zoar Cemetery, I found that he was one of the organizing members. In fact, they met at his house in many cases for the organizational meetings before they had a building of their own to meet in. He was quite widely known. I kept finding other references to him, he was involved in business activities in town. He was fairly highly thought of.

Likewise, his son was even more well thought of. So here you have an African American now, second generation at least, and somebody who had been fairly profitable and made something of themselves within the community.

Now, we know that there were other people who were doing this like Venture Smith and some of the other individuals that had been studied in the State of Connecticut, but here was one who was in our backyard. And what made this even more exciting was the fact that we had discovered in [Cato's] basement, chiseled into the chimney stack down there, a cosmogram. This was a series of crossed lines, one with a circle at the end which bears a close relationship to those of East Africa. He was enslaved here, but he still had an African mentality and approach to

the world. These cosmograms were used near openings like, for example, a chimney stack, or sometimes in other sensitive areas, to ward off evil.

We also were lucky to find a shoe in the wall of the addition that [Cato] had built that he used as a kitchen. This was one of the first [shoe in the wall] we have found in Newtown, although we realize now that it is very common. It was a well-worn brogan. These were mass-produced in Rhode Island in the late 18th century and wore like iron. This was the sort of thing that you bought for your slaves, and apparently was something that he had as typical slave footware for the time period. It was well worn. It had been worn out, essentially. So it had taken on the spirit of its wearer, presumably in this case Cato. The most intimate form of apparel that you wear is your shoe. The shoe takes on the characteristics of the man who is walking in them. The way in which he walks is clearly represented there and anybody who looks at the wear-patterns on a shoe can tell a tremendous amount about the individual. Not as good as a fingerprint, but almost. So getting impressions of shoes is important.

The English community and the English settlers over here, used these old shoes. Again, they would be put into an area, like into a wall next to a window, where they would guard the family against evil influences, because the spirit of the individual who had worn the shoe is there to ward off evil. We found one of these in Cato's house. The exciting thing was, one night when I was talking to the owner on the telephone, I had him take a close look at the shoe. I said, do you see a cross on there? He said, "Yes." Five minutes later I made the twenty-minute trip to his house. Sure enough, the cosmogram that was in the basement indicating an African frame of mind was there on the shoe. It was done in lead pencil along a straight edge and was the exact same thing. So apparently the shoe had very good medicine. More than just the shoe. He was using the African cosmogram to further its effect in its protection to the rest of the family. The best part about all of that was the fact was here you saw someone with an African mentality and an English sense of things mentality that was conjoined. So you have an African American who took on the new culture of European Connecticut, but he essentially maintained some of the original mindset that was there when he was growing up.

As I said, I was able to trace most of [the family]. It ended in the third generation in the 1870s with two elderly sisters who continued to live in the house, and died one year after the other. I found an account of the auction that was held after their death. There were photograph albums in that auction. I've lived in hopes that some of them have managed to find their way into a house, an attic, or some storage area here and might still be available. I would love to see it.

The book called *The Slaves of Central Fairfield County* was an attempt to try to summarize not just men like Cato, but others up here who led lives all the way from the most indigent and needing town help, to somebody who was substantially independent like Cato was. And so that was one of the books that I enjoyed writing more than any other because it got into the inside of this institution [of slavery] and began to find things that we were just completely unaware of before.

One thing that we didn't talk about is the whole idea of digitizing. Maybe you would give me your opinion on what those pros and cons are.

Digitalizing is basically good if you recognize its limitations. The computer has made a major difference for anybody who writes a lot and especially who writes for a living because you can edit it on the screen. You don't have to rewrite completely or cut and paste or scissor the thing apart and tape it together again. There has been a revolution in the way people write books, and that is the good part of it. You get them in digital format. And you can then use that digital format to generate hard copy in terms of a book or a pamphlet, or get it available in other ways.

The downside to digitalizing is assuming that it will always be available to you. It's not. It is less permanent than acid paper was in the early 20th century.

Acid paper leads books to literally deteriorate, to yellowing and crumbling into nothing. The problem with digital storage is the fact that, as time goes on, the newer software is not backward compatible, and as a result you lose files. I have some of them on my computer now, which I'm sorry to lose because they have information on them that I would like to make available, but I can't access them. My computer just froze up and said: No, I'm not going to go there. So that's a problem.

In addition, the storage media, we put them on—CDs and DVDs. These things do not have a infinite shelf life. In fact, SONY, I believe has indicated that their Gold DVDs, which are their archival ones, are really only good for about ten years, and then you have to go back and copy them all out again. The advantage of digital is that you don't suffer the degradation that goes on when you take a photograph, for example, and copy it. Each copy will become worse and worse and worse. Digital can be copied exactly. So that is another advantage. But the big problem is, that if you rely too heavily on just the digital medium, you are going to lose a tremendous amount of information.

I guess that is where it dovetails with the idea that say, The Bee*, if it just went digital rather than [continue to offer] a physical format, or [the idea of] people not having photo albums. They aren't physical anymore. That is not going to be as public and accessible in the future as we've experienced now.*

We can say this for *The Newtown Bee* as it exists now. They are still having problems with their website archiving material and making archived material available. I frequently go back and take excerpts from "The Way We Were," which are reminiscences of the town twenty-five, fifty, and seventy-five years ago. The problem with that is that after about three months I can't get access to it in a digital format. I can go down to the library and pick up a hard copy and photocopy it. But yes, that is a problem today.

I think we covered everything that we intended to. What unusual aspects of Newtown's history stands out to you? Some of the things that I thought about were Fairfield Hills, geographic expanse, role of the railroad, the State Forest—it is unusual for Fairfield County. And the industry and mills.

I don't know if it is really worth going there, because every town is unique in the fact that things evolved differently. But the fact of what you had mentioned there, like for example, access to the railroad. Most of the towns had access to railroads. I mean they changed the way of life, yes, but the fact was that was in common with other towns through which the railroads went.

Mills. Every community needed a gristmill and a sawmill. That is the reason why Sandy Hook exists where it does today is because you have an abundant flow of water in the Pootatuck River, which drains all of central and western Newtown. And you've got this body of water that doesn't diminish appreciably during the winter. It will decrease somewhat, but the fact is there is a constant flow, and you've got a tremendous drop. In other words, the water has to go down to the level of the Housatonic, and so as a result that means there is tremendous power in falling water that can be used by multiple mills along the river. That, again, was started in 1714 when the first mill, the town gave permission for the first mill, John Sanford, to build his mill down on what is now the bridge crossing the Pootatuck River in Sandy Hook Center.

I can go to every other town and they were doing the same thing. You needed a gristmill, you needed a sawmill. It was nice if you had a fulling mill so you could finish your wool cloth. Those factors are what really characterize all Yankee towns. As I said, they develop uniquely in the fact that the actual form they take will be slightly different. But the fact that they have the mills there is a commonality. You have to have them.

Given the transportation problems that you had here, in areas especially where the railroad didn't run. If you were going to run to the next town over, it was a slow arduous trip with a horse and wagon along bad roads. It was not as easy as jumping in your car and running down to Caraluzzi's for bread and milk before the storm hits. So, yeah, that is another function that had to be assumed by any town. It was necessary to sustain a community.

And maintain a certain amount of self-sufficiency. There were things that you never would produce locally, like paper. That had to be brought in. We noticed when doing some work on the early general stores here in Newtown, we have examples of two of the early general stores here on Main Street. And the thing that surprised me more than anything else is how small they were. One of them is the old building that is now behind Deer Street, the bakery, that was originally a general store, but it is a tiny little store. But that's because they didn't have much that they were trading. The farmers around here produced almost everything they needed, and what little they didn't, they could go get at the general store. But that was not a great deal. So the early general stores in the 18th century and early 19th century were tiny, small places. And you knew all your customers and accounted for them in your account book, so it was easy to see how business was conducted at that time. You get into the 19th century and more and more people were now getting off the farm, beginning to go to work at some of the factories that you have in Sandy Hook and the surrounding area. They are receiving a paycheck, so they are not going to bring their poultry in and try to trade that in for what they needed at the general store. But the general store had to carry more merchandise to meet the

demands of people who now had ready cash, and were going to be able to use that to acquire the things that they needed. The stores, as a result, got bigger. So that you can contrast things like the Balcony House [34 Main Street], the first story of the Balcony house was a general store. A small one. Compare that with the General Store next door, which has been kind of refurbished as a convenience store, and you realize how large that is. That is typical of a mid-19th century store.

We did have an awful lot of railroads coming through here, but that waxed and waned.

But that was relatively unique—you are right—in the late 19th century we had more rail service in town probably than any other town. We were large enough that we could do that. But Hawleyville became the major rail hub and there were five railroad companies that went through Hawleyville. At its height, around 1900, the stationmaster up there had counted one hundred and fifty-three trains per day going through that one small area. And literally from Hawleyville you could go to anyplace, especially in the northeast, quickly, because there was one of the railroads that served the area you wanted to go. It was definitely a railroad town. As automobiles, internal combustion engines became more popular, and truck transportation became more popular, the railroads were less profitable. They consolidated into larger companies like the New York, New Haven, Hartford, which eventually took over all the existing railways shortly after the turn of the century into the 20th century. At that point they began to cut back on service. So there was a decline until the period immediately after the Second World War. There was virtually no passenger trains coming in or out of town, or connecting sections of the town. You could go down to Sandy Hook, and go down to Botsford by coming up to Hawleyville and down to Botsford that way. You could do it all on the train. And that didn't become feasible after the Second World War. So it kind of died out. But during the time period of its heyday and the period from just before the Civil War until the turn of this century, railroads were extremely important to the town. And there were more of them. That is a unique feature.

And Paugusett. How did that come about?

There are two Paugusetts. They are both a little different. That was State. They are state parks. That, again, added to the open space that makes Newtown a desirable location to live, part of the open space provisions. I was focusing on town agencies like the Newtown Forest Association. But yes, the state has also been very helpful in the fact that we have two tremendously large parks for hiking and other passive recreation.

Thanks, Dan. I really appreciate you taking the time and all your thoughtful answers. It is just great.

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