



News from the Stow Historical Society

A newsletter for all friends of Stow history.

Please feel free to pass it along to others who might be interested!

September 2012

Mark Twain to Visit West School on Sunday, September 23

Actually, actor and Mark Twain interpreter **Bern Budd** will visit the West School Museum on Sunday, September 23 to present a one-man show called “The Hannibal Years.” The 3 pm program is free and open to all interested persons.

Mark Twain, of course, was the pen name adopted by Samuel Clemens. Mr. Budd’s performance is based on the great American author’s life growing up on the banks of the Mississippi River and stories about the real life characters behind *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. As Twain put it, “This is my tale – and some of it is true.”

Fittingly for the West School setting, he’ll also talk about the author’s education in the 1830s and ‘40s. The production is geared for ages 10 to 100, but Mr. Budd has found that younger children do seem to enjoy the show even if they do not understand it all.

Also plan to join us on Sunday, October 14 for “Stow Knows: Skills in Our Town.” This family-oriented program, running from 3 to 5:30 pm, will feature artists and artisans from Stow demonstrating skills as diverse as beekeeping, cider-making, pottery making and weaving, with advice and hands-on experiences for kids and adults alike.

All Stow West School programs are presented jointly by the Stow Historical Society and the Stow Historical Commission.

Stow West School Museum programs are supported in part by a



grant from the Stow Cultural Council, a local agency which is supported by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency.





Skip Warren on Hillside Cemetery

In early June, Pilot Grove Farm's Skip Warren led a tour of historic Hillside Cemetery, an event jointly sponsored by the Stow Historical Society and the Stow Historical Commission.

Skip knows his cemeteries – Warrens have been in Stow since 1782, and he has ancestors interred in all three of the town's burying grounds.

Hillside is Stow's second-oldest cemetery, with more than 300 recorded burials (and probably more that were

not recorded). Families with Hillside plots include the Warrens, Gates, Smiths, Stows, Hales and Whitcombs.

For those who couldn't attend the tour, Skip has provided this narrative. Thanks to Mike and Maureen Busch for assisting in the transcript and providing photos of the event. Transcript has been edited and formatted for newsletter publication.

Skip's "Hillside Tour"

In the stone wall at the front of the cemetery, there are five rings drilled in the rocks, three on one side of the gate and two others on the opposite side. The cemetery was established in 1812, and folks arriving by horse and buggy could tie their horses up here. Although we think of Hillside as a 19th Century cemetery, burials continued there into the 1940s and 1950s. Two burials have taken place within the past 12 years.

Some gravestones tell sad stories. Just inside the gate, we see the stone for Adeline Wood, a six-year-old girl who is buried alone. There is no sign of any other family or relatives nearby.

Nearby is a flat stone for Robert and Gladys Patterson, the most recent burials here at Hillside. Mr. Patterson was buried in 2005. He served in the National Guard during World War II because he was color-blind and the Army would not take him.

Also nearby is an area with four corner stones and rods similar to a fence. Here lie Peter Fletcher and Betsy Warren Fletcher and some family members. Betsy Warren was sister to my great-grandfather, Francis Worland Warren, who is buried in the corner farther up in the hill. My great-grandfather and Peter Fletcher operated a tannery in Ashburnham for many years.

The Fletcher family plot, just past Skip's right shoulder.





At Hillside, an American flag and a medallion honor William Goldsmith as one of Stow's rare veterans of the War of 1812. He died in 1860.

At the center of the cemetery there is a tall gravestone for the Brown family. Five of their children died before they got to be seven years old, some when they were only months old. We do not know if it was smallpox, typhoid fever, tuberculosis or some other childhood disease. Twice they named a child Cyrus, and both died young. I've noticed in reading gravestones at cemeteries that this happened in many families.

Nearby is a small stone with a baby lamb on top and the legend "Our Baby." A seven-month-old girl named Mary is buried there. This is the Gates family lot. To the right of it are a large number of stones for the Reed family, not known in Stow at the present time.

The mound in the middle of the cemetery holds the Jacob Whitney tomb on the left and the Whitcomb family tomb on the right – associated with the story of "Crazy Ben Whitcomb."

On the right side of the cemetery is a grassy open area with no stones or monuments except a large stone in front of a mound, suggesting a tomb, and with the name Eveleth etched on it.

Located in a fenced-in area up the slope are the graves of Rev. Reuben Bates and his wife, buried there in the 1860s. Rev. Bates was the 12th Minister of the First Parish Church of Stow, whose steeple can be seen from this gravesite. This is the only fully fenced-in burial area in this cemetery.

At the top, up a steep bank, is the Warren family lot. There lie buried my great-great-grandfather Jonas Warren, his wife Dolly Tucker Warren, my great-grandfather Francis Worland Warren and his two wives, Ann Hayward (1st) and Eleanor Maria Derby (2nd). I am descended from Maria Derby, which is how the Warrens and Derbys became related over the years. There is a name on the monument for Charles N. Warren, but he migrated to Kentucky, leaving the farm to his brother Francis. Also there are names of some members of the Wilder family, the family that lived at what is now Shelburne Farm.

At the left is the Robinson lot, which family intermarried with the Warren family. Two family members are buried here, Mary Warren and Emma Warren. I can just recall Cousin Emma, who died in 1940. She lived in the west ell of the Pilot Grove farmhouse, which was built onto the main house in 1861. The original farmhouse was built by 1808.

The Derby family lot is located in the upper area. Linda Mikoski and family, who continue the operation of Derby Farm Orchards, is the great-granddaughter of John E. Derby, buried in this lot in 1956.



Crazy Ben Whitcomb Rides (and Sleeps) Again



At center, the Whitcomb family tomb at Hillside Cemetery – and Ben’s sometimes abode.

and fabricated long, white “ascension robes.” Women bobbed their hair and removed the ruffles from their dresses. Farmers abandoned their crops.

“**Prophet Houghton,**” the leader of Stow’s Millerite community, stopped feeding his cattle, letting them starve because it was, in his words, “a waste of time and money.”

The day the world didn’t end was remembered as “The Great Disappointment.”

In Stow’s case, a player in the saga was “Crazy Ben Whitcomb,” a Taylor Road resident who had attended many revival-like meetings at Houghton’s nearby home. A large man who could intimidate authority, Whitcomb kept two horses – the white one, he said, was for his ride to Heaven. The other, a big red one, was evidently for making life Hell on Earth.

By all accounts Whitcomb was a thoughtful, kindly person – except when, in his words, he went “religious mad.” Then he would tear around town on his big red horse, screaming and generally terrorizing the town. Often waving a sword, he wore a flaming scarlet cloak, an old mortarboard hat with black cloth that wrapped below his chin, and sleigh and cow bells sewn all over his clothing. Also, the two halves of a huge gray hornet’s nest fixed as sort of military epaulettes on his shoulders. Once he finished, he would return home and resume being thoughtful and kindly.

As decades passed, Whitcomb grew even stranger. He began sleeping in his family Hillside Cemetery tomb in mid-winter, then carrying his late brother’s skull on his rides. He would walk into people’s houses at meal-times and plop it down on the dinner table – not surprisingly prompting great hysterics. The selectmen had been reluctant to confront Whitcomb but they ordered him to return the skull to the tomb. He compromised by carrying it around in a paper bag.

He also became melancholy. One night in 1877, after sitting and talking normally with three visitors, Whitcomb excused himself to go to bed – and walked into the woods and hanged himself.

The first half of the 19th Century was a time of religious ferment in the United States, with many radical sects arising.

Stow was one of many communities subjected to the Millerite vision of the approaching end of the world – there were more than 50,000 Millerites throughout the country in the early 1840s and the movement was strong throughout eastern and central Massachusetts.

It all stemmed from a prophesy by a New York man named William Miller that the second coming of Jesus – and the end of the Earthly world – would occur on October 22, 1844.

As the date approached, many believers gave away their possessions, sold their land