

BRIDGEWATER HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

April 2023

Issue No. Twenty Three



circa. 1911

Monthly meetings

held last Tuesday
of each month at 6:30 p.m.
Old Brick School House
12 North Bridgewater Road
Bridgewater, VT 05034
www.bridgewaterhistory.org

2023 PROGRAMS

Programs will be Sunday at the
Bridgewater Grange at 2pm

June 4th

Howard Coffin
"The President I Thought I Knew"

August 27th

Cynthia Bittinger
"Grace Coolidge"

BHS OFFICERS

President: Polly Timken
Vice President: Bob Kancir
Secretary: Althea Derstine
Treasurer: Julie Stevens
Membership: Sue Kancir
Curator: Polly Timken

BHS DIRECTORS

John Atwood
Barry Griggs
Melinda Griggs
Elisha Lee
Alice Paglia
Karol Messier
Jeannette Sawyer
Sondra Stevens
Chris Stevens



Southern Vermont Telephone
Nellie Booth Perkins on the step
Located on Route 4 - Bridgewater, Vermont

From the President

By Polly Timken

We have not been idle this winter, with work starting in February on our projects for 2023. August 2nd, 1923, brought fame to Bridgewater and W. A. Perkins. This summer is the 100th anniversary of his trip to Plymouth to inform the Coolidge family that President Harding had died.

BHS is readying an exhibit of the telephone switchboards that were used at the Southern Vermont Telephone Company in Bridgewater. The company was incorporated in 1907, by W. A. Perkins. His wife Nellie was the operator. They received the telegram the night of August 2nd, 1923. Our exhibit, "The Message Gets Through", shows the actual telephone switchboards, along with photos and material on the Southern Vermont Telephone Company. Visitors to both the Historical Society and the Coolidge Museum will be able to visualize the excitement on the night of August 2nd, 100 years ago.

Both of our summer programs are centered around the Coolidge Presidency. Howard Coffin will present "The President I thought I Knew" on June 4th, and Cyndy Bittinger will speak on August 27th on Grace Coolidge.



Nellie Perkins

The story will also be presented online at the Vermont Historical Society. They have created "History in the 252", an online presentation from each town in the State. These stories cover all ranges of topics and are to be presented in the Card Room at the State House on April 5th. VHS is hoping to showcase to the legislature the efforts all history groups take to preserve the history of Vermont. Viewers can read about Bridgewater and other towns by visiting Vermonthistory.org and searching for "History in the 252".

We thank our members for being so generous in our membership/annual fund drive this past winter and look forward to seeing everyone this summer. Please come and celebrate our summer season with us.



John Coolidge and W. A. Perkins' granddaughter Ruth C. Perkins, 1924

Southern Vermont Telephone Company



W. A. Perkins

Winfred A. (W. A.) Perkins (1863-1936) of Bridgewater, started his career as a “telegrapher” in White River. W. A. was Jeannette Sawyer’s (BHS past president and founder) grandfather. He incorporated the Southern Vermont Telephone Company on June 21, 1907, commencing business in Bridgewater on September 1, 1909 as president and general manager. The company was a family affair with wife Nellie, and sons William, James and Fred serving as directors. Nellie also served as secretary and treasurer as well as the operator from 1912 until her retirement around 1955. The telephone office was in their home on Main Street (Route 4) in Bridgewater. One of the many telephones installed was in Southgate's barn for the stage drivers and also at Mr. Fifes at Bridgewater Corners. Ring 7-24.

In 1915, W. A. built a barn in back of his home to house the construction of crosstrees for the telephone lines they were stringing as the company grew. By 1921 the company was serving Bridgewater, Woodstock, Plymouth, Sherburne, Reading and Ludlow. Eugene Leavitt and his father Bernard took over the system in 1938. In 1955, Nellie Perkins was the first in Bridgewater to use a rotary dial telephone.



May 14-1955
Miner photo
Mrs. Nellie B. Perkins makes first call on the dial system of the Southern Vermont Telephone Company exchange at Bridgewater May 14—Manager Eugene Leavitt watches the operation.

My Grandfather's Visit to the Coolidge Home

By Edith Blanchard Osmer

Frank Furman had a job one time, doing carpentry work for President Coolidge, at the President's home in Plymouth VT. He said he worked there for a week or two when the president paid him then invited him and his wife, Edith, up for supper the following Saturday night. Frank was pretty nervous about going but they got ready and went. He said, Thank God there was only 1 fork, 1 knife and 1 spoon. He was worried they might have more utensils and he wouldn't know which one to use first. Well, Mrs. Coolidge had cooked a big pork roast with potatoes, gravy and vegetables. Gramp Furman said he was still nervous, but Mrs. Coolidge passed all the dishes around and then it was time to eat. President Coolidge reached over cut a big piece of pork off and threw it down on the velvet rug for the dog to eat. He said after that he felt right at home. After the supper they had pie and ice cream with coffee. They enjoyed the supper and the visit then they went home. He said not many people get invited to the President's home and have a common meal and conversation.



Edith & Frank Furman

BHS 2023 Programs

We have two summer programs at the Bridgewater Grange this year. The talks are at 2:00pm with refreshments afterwards.

On June 4th, Howard Coffin will open the season with "Calvin Coolidge as I understood him, a complex and somewhat mysterious human being". Howard knew and wrote about many people who remembered Coolidge. He has done considerable research over the years and was a member of the board of the Coolidge Foundation.

August 27th brings us Cyndy Bittinger. Cyndy has worked with the Coolidge Foundation. She will present an overview of Grace Anna Goodhue Coolidge. Grace was born in Burlington. After graduation from UVM she went to teach deaf children in Northampton, MA. It was there she met Calvin Coolidge. Their life was a political one, as Calvin worked his way up from lawyer to Governor of MA to Vice President to President. She persevered through fame and tragedy.

Come hear the talk and see archival photos.



Calvin and Grace Coolidge

Photo from Library of Congress

BHS Research Requests

By Bob Kancir:

The Bridgewater Historical Society gets requests from people doing research on area people, places or objects regarding any information that we might have available.

Recently BHS researched a painting purchased by a gentleman in North Carolina. The painting was purchased in NC in a Skinner Sale. On the back of the painting "Bridgewater, Vermont" and "House that Richard E Thompson was born in 1892". The painting turned out to be what is today the Woodbridge Inn. Two of BHS prior newsletters contained history of the Thompson family who built the B&B.

We also contacted a member of the Thompson family and BHS member, who provided the following: According to the family history, Sara Goodenough Fish Thompson (1837-1904) had the house built with the pension she received as DeAlgeroy Thompson's widow. He died in 1883 from illness or complications from wounds received in the Civil War. Richard Eugene Thompson Sr. (1892-1983), was born in the house.

It's possible that the painting was done by either Blanche Curtis King or Mildred Curtis Ward. Their father was the Curtis of the "Curtis and Booth Sawmill" that was at the end of the woolen mill.

We also shared our research with the current owners of the Woodbridge Inn.



Another request was from a woman in Florida doing research for a DAR presentation on Esther Sumner Damon, The Last American Revolutionary Pensioner. BHS provided her with the following information from "Bridgewater Vermont 1779-1976" by Gladys S. Adams:

Noah Damon, born Milton Mass Aug 25 1760, was with the Milton Militia at Lexington April 19 1775. In 1776 served under Capt. Stark in Long Island where he received a bayonet wound in the thigh. Served numerous enlistments 1777 thru 1780. By 1790's, he lived in Bridgewater, then moved to Eaton, Lower Canada. After the death of his wife, Keziah, he returned to Bridgewater where he married Sept 6 1835, Esther Sumner, he being 78 and she 21 at the time. He died at the home of his daughter Mary (Damon) Sunbury, Benton NH July 2 1853. Esther (Sumner) Damon died Plymouth Union Nov 11, 1905, the last widow pensioner of the Revolutionary War.



The caretakers for OQ Farm, formerly the Holiday Farm, in Bridgewater Corners were curious about its history. BHS was able to provide them an old photo of the farm and one of our newsletters containing a story and additional photos of the Holiday Farm.

Lastly, a request came from a gentleman from Oregon who is researching his 4th Great Grandparent, Abner Woodward (1776-1859) who was buried in Bridgewater, perhaps in Mt. Pleasant Cemetery. BHS was able to confirm through town records that Abner Woodward married a Mary Woodward on 17 Dec 1814 in Bridgewater. Although we could not find a grave site in Mt. Pleasant Cemetery for Abner, BHS members did learn of a small cemetery on Gold Coast Rd with unmarked stones and a sign noting "Woodard Cemetery".

Our newsletters have been a wonderful resource for these searches. All prior newsletters are available on our website Events tab: www.bridgewaterhistory.org

Telegram gets to Calvin Coolidge

At 11:30 pm on the night of August 2nd, 1923 an important call came into the telephone exchange of the Vermont Southern Telephone Company in Bridgewater from the White River Western Union. Nellie Perkins was the full time operator of the company started by her husband W. A. Perkins in 1907. The message was from George B. Christian in San Francisco and addressed to Vice President Calvin Coolidge. At the time, the Vice President was vacationing at the Coolidge homestead in Plymouth Notch. There was no telephone at the homestead so W. A. immediately drove his 1918 Cole-8 to Plymouth Notch to deliver the message. Upon arriving at the homestead he knocked on the front door. Awakened, Colonel John Coolidge, father of the Vice President, opened the door let W. A. in and receiving the message called out to Calvin who was sleeping upstairs. The Vice President awoke at once to hear what the message said, President Harding was dead! Calvin Coolidge was sworn in as the 30th President of the United States by his father, a notary, at 2:47 am on August 3rd, 1923.



Calvin Coolidge sworn in
Photo from Library of Congress



Mr. Blanchard, the Perkins' neighbor, raced next door to notify Calvin Coolidge's staff members who were staying at the Furman House.

Source: "The Swearing in of 'Silent Cal' The Unique Inauguration of Calvin Coolidge American's 30th President at Plymouth, Vermont August 3, 1923 By Vest Orton

Southern Vermont Telephone Company Grows

Spirit of the age. [volume],
December 11, 1909, Image 1

Vermont Standard
Woodstock, Vermont
19 May 1955, Thu • Page 1

A Growing Telephone Company

The Southern Vermont Telephone company, with headquarters at Bridgewater village, is growing rapidly, stretching its wires through all the Bridgewater and invading other neighborhoods. W. A. Perkins, owner and manager of the company, who was in Woodstock Tuesday, said that the 15,000 pounds of wire, about 60 miles, was nearly used up, and that more would soon be ordered. The company now has 84 calls.

A survey for an extension of the company's line from Clarence Blanchard's on the Plymouth road, to Messer hill, six miles, was recently made. The people up Messer hill way are in a hurry for the service. The poles are cut and a "bee" will shortly be held to set them.

From West Bridgewater Mr. Perkins' line climbs Bridgewater hill to James West's and from there the wire runs through Daily Hollow to Dea Severance's. It appears that Mr. Severance wanted the service and to get it he set 56 poles himself, which is doing a good deal for the privilege of calling up his neighbors.

Dial System At Bridgewater

Bridgewater moved into the ranks of modern telephone service last Saturday morning at 9 a.m. when the Southern Vermont Telephone Company exchange was switched to a dial system.

This marked the end of service for the old switchboard which had been installed there in 1909 by the late W. A. Perkins.

The company serves some 215 subscribers in Bridgewater, West Bridgewater, Plymouth and Sherburne. First call on the new system was made by Mrs. Nellie B. Perkins, widow of Mr. Perkins and operator at Bridgewater since 1912.

Mr. Perkins first set up an exchange in the Martin Meyers residence on River street in Woodstock. The fall of 1908, he ran a line to Bridgewater. In June of 1909, he established the switchboard in Bridgewater.

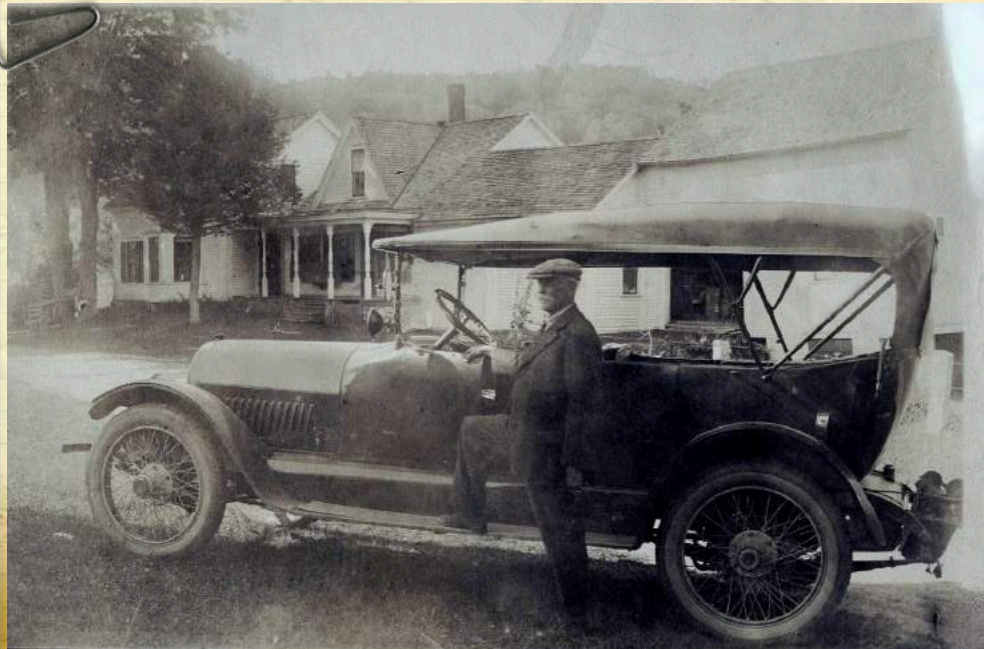
Prior to that time, calls went through the Woodstock exchange.

Eugene Leavitt, present manager, and his father, the late Bernard Leavitt, took over the Bridgewater system in 1938. Recently, it had been partially on central battery and partially on the old hand crank method.

The new dial system is of the latest design. Toll calls will be made through Woodstock.

It is interesting to note that the late Mr. Perkins, company founder, delivered the telegram from Bridgewater to Calvin Coolidge in Plymouth announcing the death of President Harding and informing Mr. Coolidge that he was the next president.

Mrs. Perkins will continue her work in the Bridgewater Woolen Company mill where she has worked days for a number of years. She handled the exchange for night calls.



W. A. Perkins and his Cole-8 automobile, shown here in front of the Coolidge Homestead.

The Bridgewater Historical Society

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