



Putney Historical Society News

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www.putneyhistory.org
 phone 802-387-5862
 email: putneyhs@sover.net

Putney Town Hall, Rte.5
 Box 233
 Putney, Vermont 05346

Board of Directors:
 Ruth Barton, President
 Lindley Speers, Vice President
 Stuart Strothman, Secretary
 Laurel Ellis, Treasurer
 Tom Jamison
 Barbara Taylor
 Jacquie Walker

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80 YEARS AND STILL GOING STRONG: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PUTNEY COMMUNITY CENTER

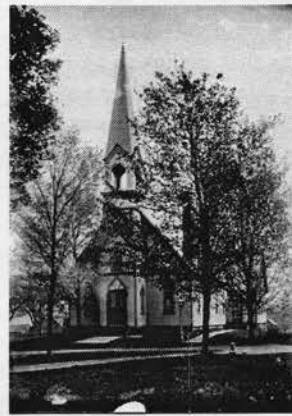
By Laurel Ellis and Leon Cooper

The history of the Putney Community Center can be said to rightly begin even before the construction of the Baptist Meeting House Church which was to become its home.

The 1883 Meeting House deed indicates that a one-family dwelling house was already standing on the site where the Church was slated to be built. A close examination of the present structure makes a strong case for the rear portion of the building being in fact the dwelling house referred to in the 1883 deed. An exterior-wall window is still visible from the interior stairway leading to the second floor, making it clear that the rear part of the building must have once stood as an independent structure.

Town rumor has it that the Baptist Church had been moved to its present location

from somewhere either on West Hill or on Putney Mountain, but deeds and other re-



search indicate that this is not the case. The Fortnightly Club's 1953 History of Putney tells us that the original Baptist Church in Putney was sold around 1860 and was "taken down and the material used for other purposes". It adds that "the front door of Mrs. Mary Thwing's house came

from this building." The Baptist congregation did not reorganize again independently in Putney until 1880, when it temporarily held services in the Town Hall. The new Baptist Church was built on Christian Square in 1884 and thrived "until 1919 when the members joined the Methodist and Congregationalist congregations to form the present Federated Church" [now the United Church of Putney]. It makes sense, then, that the 1884 church structure was built to abut the house that was already existing on the lot so that this house could be utilized as extra space for other church activities.

The Baptist Church was purchased by Miss Sara Andrews and Miss Bertha Estey who then donated the property to the newly formed Putney Community Center on September 10, 1925.(cont'd on p.3)

PHS Assists with Vt. Public Television Production of Aiken Documentary

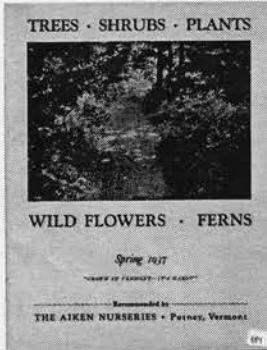
A new documentary of Senator George Aiken is in the works. This significant film is a production of Vermont Public Television, directed by Rick Moulton.

Mr. Moulton has been researching Aiken in different parts of the country, and came to the Historical Society seeking artifacts and images to use in his film.

Through his work with Laura Heller and Stuart Strothman, he selected artifacts from our collection—such as a caftain given in 1965 to Senator Aiken by King Faisal of Saudi Arabia—and many scanned images, including catalogues from the Aiken Nurseries, and pictures of the Corser farm (Aiken's birthplace, now replaced by I-91), the West Hill

Schoolhouse, his family at home, and in other Putney locations.

We are pleased to have been able to assist Mr. Moulton in his work, and he has been pleased to return the favor by donation, and by helping us to locate valuable Putney-related images and documents. Look for the documentary's release within the coming year.



ANNUAL MEETING!

Our 2005 annual meeting will be held on Sunday, September 11 at 2 p.m. Once again, it will take place at the Putney Cares Barn on Kimball Hill.

This year, we will have a number of short presentations, including PHS president Ruth Barton talking

about the historical society's past, present and future, and secretary Stuart Strothman showing the current holdings of the historical society, which have been recorded on the computer thus far. We also plan to show pictures from the George Aiken

documentary, and to have a memorial discussion of Elaine Dixon regarding her remarkable service to the Putney Historical Society.

Refreshments will be served. Please come and hear the important events occurring at this transitional time.



The images above may be used in the Vermont Public television documentary of George Aiken

Electronic Archiving in Progress

Many of you who have visited the historical society know that we have a variety of holdings, including artifacts, photos, glass plate negatives, books, and documents. Over the years, careful listings have been made of some of the collections, especially the photos, deeds, and town reports. Now that we have packed our artifacts, we have a listing of these as well.

However, our subject files have always been working files, a receptacle of research efforts by the people of Putney, in a constant state of rearrangement. Now, we are beginning the painstaking task of listing these files and

establishing accession numbers and storing other information about the collections.

Our secretary Stuart Strothman is currently heading up the long-term effort to document, preserve, and summarize the holdings in our collection. The tasks included in this effort are numerous! Staples must be removed, valuable items must have proper sleeves, and documents must be assessed and identified according to archival standards.

This process is projected to last two years, and the Historical Society is seeking volunteer assistance in this work from townspeople and stu-

dents of BUHS, who are required to spend forty hours in community service.

Though only half a file cabinet drawer has been completed, the document listing is approaching a thousand items, which can now be instantly searched through electronic commands. When we have completed listings of not only our documents, but our books, artifacts, collections, and so forth, we will have formidable research capability. It is difficult to describe how useful such a set of listings can be to the town of Putney. Come to the annual meeting on Sept. 11 to see what we have done so far!

PHS Proposes a Home in the Refurbished Town Hall

We have packed our things carefully, and moved them upstairs in the town hall. The only things remaining downstairs are the genealogical files, which are much used by townspeople and visitors, our computer desk, a metal bookshelf and a cabinet.

Most of you are aware of the repairs which are taking place on the historic Town Hall building—the ceiling is currently under repair, the down-

stairs is being renovated to accommodate expanded town offices, and decisions are being made about what to do with the rest of the building. Two organizations, the Historical Society and the Putney Area Artists Group, are proposing a shared use of the space upstairs at the Town Hall. Lindley Speers and other PHS board members have been working with the Town Hall Feasibility Com-

mittee and the Selectboard to develop a proposal for the use of the historic meeting space upstairs. The proposal includes flexible display and storage areas, and could create an opportunity to have a lovely seasonal museum, and still allow other town organizations to use the refurbished space for their own purposes. We hope very much that this dream of a permanent, shared space will come to fruition.

Putney Community Center cont'd...

Charter Community Center members adopted a constitution and by-laws which state that the organization's purpose was "to unite the community through education and recreational activities for better citizenship." The organization's first Board Chair was George D. Aiken, who history shows then parlayed this prestigious position into becoming Governor of Vermont – and later, U. S. Senator.

The first officers were President, Miss Bertha Estey; Vice President, Mrs. E. H. Richardson; Secretary, Mrs. Esther Pratt; and Treasurer, Harry Monroe. Mrs. Pratt also served as director from 1925 to 1942 and played a major, positive role in the development of Putney's children during that period.

In the early days, funding came from proceeds from the Center's annual "Opportunity Sales" and other events. Also, an Annual Drive was held each year seeking donations of \$1.00 ("or more") from each member age 16 or over to help with operating expenses.

One of the best accounts of the activities of the town can be found in the Community Center archives, and is a paper entitled "A study of the Town of Putney, Vermont – 1936" written by one of Putney School's first students, Monica Owen. A valuable resource for many other subjects, she devotes two pages to the Community Center, from which the following is taken:

The Community Center is primarily for recreation. The children used to be at a loss as to what to do after school, and so a very full program has been arranged. Something is nearly always happening here.

Each of the various organizations, such as the Scouts, has an evening for a meeting or to put on some kind of entertainment once a week. Monday someone from out of town comes in and entertains any who may want to come. Tuesday night the Boy Scouts meet, Wednesday the boys' basketball team plays an out of town team, (40 boys come sometimes from the town), Thursday the Putney orchestra meets (with its 11 members), Friday there is usually a dance or something lasting until midnight. Sometimes card parties are held then. Monday and Wednesday afternoons there are sewing classes for the girls, two afternoons someone takes care of all the little children in the town so that the mothers may leave if they wish to. Then there are pool and shuffle board tournaments for

the older children. Some afternoons the children from the Central School receive instruction in basketball, their only chance at this sort of thing, as there are no extensive playgrounds. In summer there are picnics, a field day, swimming, boxing and wrestling for the boys (given by the Center's instructor). For the parents there are the dances, the outside entertainments (movies, magician and marionettes for the children as well). ...Mrs. Pratt said that there were a number of moronic children in town and there were others whose tendencies to wander off the straight and narrow worried her a good deal...The main difficulty seems to be that there are quite a few unemployed boys hanging around with nothing to do except get into trouble with the girls younger than themselves at the school. Unfortunately the girls seem to take to this..."

During World War II, a very active Putney Community Center published its own newspaper, the "Putney Reporter". Mimeographed, on a machine in the office of the Aiken Nurseries, it was produced bi-monthly from November 15, 1943 through October 30, 1945. The paper was filled with local news, news about service men and women, editorial comment, poems, humor, and letters written "home" to the Center from soldiers on active duty. Copies were mailed free of charge to all Putney residents in the service. Now a historical treasure in the archives, the venture was paid for by many local businesses of the era that faithfully purchased advertising on the back page of each issue.

M. P. Sherwood, the Putney Reporter's first editor, wrote the following in the first issue: "Not many communities are as fortunate as Putney is in having an equipped and staffed recreational building like the Center. Newcomers to the village, like some of us, are constantly impressed with the limitless advantages of such a gathering place. The children of Putney need never grow up socially maladjusted. All of the elements that are necessary for the development of the individual personality are to be found at the Center."

In the later forties and fifties, local businessman Dwight Smith, a member of the Board of Directors from its beginnings until his death in 1960, kept people informed of activities at the Center in his frequent newsletters. Childless himself, the Community Center gave him an opportunity to help raise a village full of children he

loved.

Dances and after school activities for teens continued through the seventies, and for a time were affiliated with the YMCA in Bellows Falls. In its first 50 years, at least 3 generations of Putney's children grew up knowing the familiar old building as an extension of their home. It was a place to have fun and to learn – without necessarily being aware that you were learning.

Sadly, by the end of the 70's, declining usage and a deteriorating building led to a less vibrant period for the Center.

In 1994, a group called Putney Community Group consisting of representatives from five non-profit organizations - Putney Community Center, Putney Day Care Center, Putney Family Services, Putney Cares, and Putney Recreation League – met with the Putney Central School Board to share concerns, needs and wants for the town as a whole. A list of questions was devised and carefully answered by each group. The Community Center's Board of Directors (at the time Linda Brooks, Anita Coomes, Ian Eddy, Kate Hudson, Tammy Severance and Connie St. John) then began the effort to see what could be done to renovate the Community Center so that it could once again return to play a pivotal recreational role for the Town.

Fundraising efforts were undertaken, sleeves were rolled up, and the work began. In April of 1998, an Open House was held to show off the tremendous improvements that had thus far been accomplished, and to dedicate the newly constructed office space and bathrooms as "The Ellis Wing" in honor of the long time work and devotion of Ken and Shirley Ellis.

The Town of Putney continues to give its support by paying to heat the building, and the Community Center is once again home to a wide range of uses and events which currently include: The Village Nursery School, monthly dances for 6th – 9th graders (September through May/June), Boy Scout/Cub Scout meetings, Tai Chi classes, children's performances, weddings, memorial gatherings, concerts, dances, indoor games, community rummage sales, plays and play rehearsals, meetings, dog training classes, sewing circles, and variety shows. The Putney Community Center remains a "happening" place in Putney.

**PUTNEY
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY**

Newsletter items assembled and
written by:
Stuart Strothman
Laurel Ellis
Leon Cooper

Phone: 802-387-5762
Email: putneyhs@sover.net

We're on the web!
www.putneyhistory.org

Putney
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Putney Historical Items on iputney.com

The Historical Society has been asked to provide articles for people to view on the [iputney](http://iputney.com) website. Because of the large number of people reading historical articles on iputney.com (such as a recent contribution on Carol Brown written by Sue Mulcahy), Paul LeVasseur, website advisor and director of the board of the Putney Public Library has asked that the Historical Society contribute short historical articles to the website in a regular way. He was able to solicit volunteers to help with the project, who will type up articles from PHS and post them. Thanks to Paul and the volunteers from all of us at PHS, and please visit iputney.com to read about our town!

BRING YOUR PHOTOS OF LIFE IN PUTNEY!

When it comes to history, it is only natural that our curiosity and interest is focused on that which is long past. We are grateful when someone had the foresight to record events and images to give us a glimpse back in time – especially in times when the technology of today was not available.

Things of today are too familiar and too common to be thought of in the same way. However, the events of today are tomorrow's history and worth recording and preserving for the fu-



Hannum's corn, 1919



Children at the Federated Church, 1932



Putney Central event circa 1968

ture. Fifty years from now, or even less, our present will be transformed from mundane to remarkable, forever obliterated by a new and ever changing present.

As a Historical Society, it falls on us to not only preserve what we have from the past but to anticipate what

will be sought after in the future.

A logical and manageable start is the collection of current photographs that can be added to year by year.

Ideally, we should have a designated Town History photographer who would serve a term with the responsibility of recording events such as the building of the library or the fire station, concerts on the Tavern Lawn or the Town Picnic. At the very least, we can all share in making a good collection by remembering to make an extra print of

photos that represent life in Putney for a Town Photo Album.

Let's get started at this year's annual meeting. Bring a photo or two (labeled with names, date and pertinent information) and donate it to the future.