

Putney Historical Society News

Winter 2006

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

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

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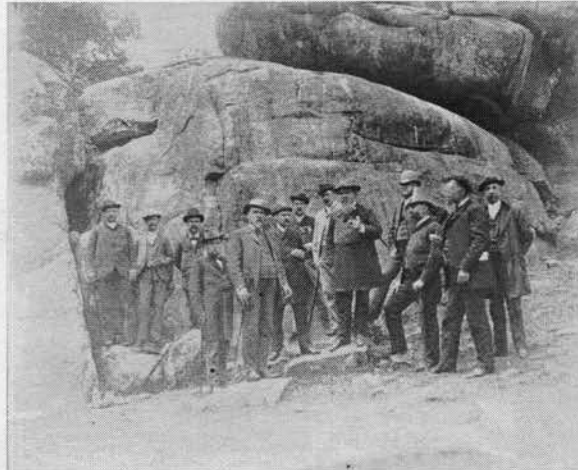
George Houghton: Civil War Photographer

By Gray Grandy, Stuart Strothman, Jane Potter, Zak Emond, and Amy Forbes

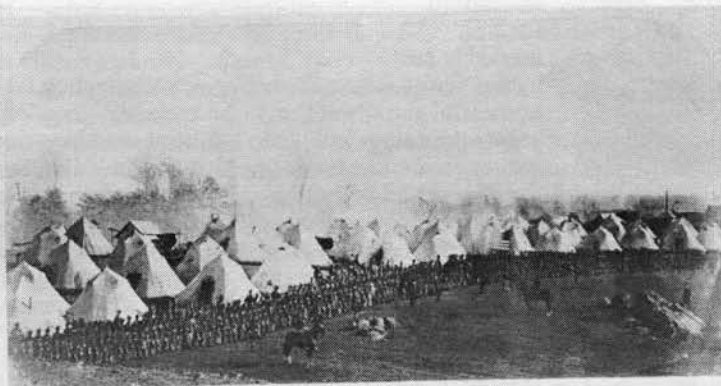
When the Civil War broke out in 1860, both sides responded. Both the north and the south rounded up soldiers—every town helped out, including our town of Putney. One of the men to go home and pack his things was the only professional Civil War photographer from Vermont, George Houghton, who was born in Putney and lived most of his life in Brattleboro. Houghton helped the north's cause in his own way; he was present at many important parts of the war, including Gettysburg, and his photos brought the war home to the people of Vermont. Although he was there during many battles, he could not get photos of the action because of the speed and the weight of his camera. However, there are many pictures of men in their camps, and at other living

establishments. The collection includes a number from the current site of BUHS, including a photo of the 1st Vermont regiment, showing their white tents against the backdrop of Wantastiquet, getting dinner ready, and some in line waiting for the picture to be taken; there is

another of the hospital that was erected on the same site, which had a high rate of successful recovery compared to the hospitals further south (this one is by Houghton). He also has a photo of governor Ormsbee of Vermont with his staff and Lt. General Fuller at Devil's Den in Gettysburg, the site of a particularly bloody battle, on July 3, 1888; of musket test firing; of a sniper; of a large array of soldiers lined up in front of their tents, awaiting battle; of Civil War officers; of men from the 18th Vermont relaxing, hanging out of mill windows and just sitting around doing their laundry in Wolf Run Shoals, Virginia; and of a family of slaves at home, their eyes showing deep



Governor Ormsbee of Vermont at Devil's Den, July 3, 1888

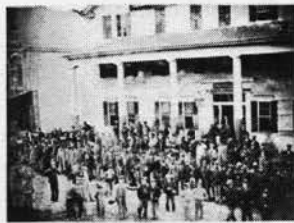


Ready for Civil War action: photographs by George Houghton of Putney

concern and long experience. There are many more, including one of Houghton's own camp; he took many, very valuable photographs..



Civil War sniper



Vermont 4th Regiment in VA



Test Firing



Houghton's Camp



Hospital on the current site of Brattleboro Union High School—formerly the fairgrounds

Obsidian from the Connecticut River?

The Putney Historical Society has a collection of Native American artifacts collected by Gerald Coane, formerly of Brattleboro, during the 1950s and 1960s.

One of the artifacts is an obsidian (volcanic glass) projectile point (arrow head) said to have been found along the Connecticut River. It is very unusual for obsidian artifacts to be found in New England. There are no local sources, and the material probably came from the western United States or Mexico. Based on the shape of the artifact, it could date to the Early Archaic period or about 7500 to 9000

years ago. However, there is concern that it was actually picked up on a trip Coane took out west and was mistakenly labeled as being found along the Connecticut River. One step in trying to assess that possibility is determining the source of the obsidian.

Matthew Boulanger of the Archaeometry Laboratory at the University of Missouri, and an archeologist with extensive experience in Vermont has volunteered to have the material sourced through x-ray fluorescence, a non-destructive process that allows for characterization

of the elements in the obsidian. Once this signature is determined it can be compared to similar signatures from known obsidian sources and a match can be found.

We were hoping to have the results of this analysis to report in this newsletter, but the equipment in Missouri has recently required recalibration, causing a delay.

The PHS expects to receive the results of this analysis soon. In the future, the PHS hopes to obtain the funding to conduct similar analyses on pottery and other artifacts in the society's collection.

Guilford Central School Students Donate Historic Photos from Putney-Born Photographer

On a cold Thursday in February, a group of eighth graders from Guilford Central traveled to the Brattleboro Historical Society to meet with president Hazel Phelps and Civil War researcher Peg Barry. Their mission was to scan the photographs of the Putney-born Civil War photographer George Houghton as part of the Poets Afield project at Guilford Central,

funded in part by the Vermont Arts Council. Successful authors of the grant application included Putney residents Stuart Strothman and Susan Hesse. Recently, members of the Putney Historical Society determined that Houghton was indeed born in Putney, and probably spent much of his childhood here. Houghton, a great-great grandfather of Putney His-

torical Society's president Ruth Barton, took many precious photographs, and the Brattleboro Historical Soci-

ety. Anyone can view them online at flickr.com, a photo-sharing website owned by Yahoo—once at the site, key

in poetsafield, and then click on the blue, underlined poetsafield tag beneath the photos that come up. A set of Houghton's Civil War photos will then be available for public viewing (along with a lovely set of photos from Brattleboro resident Dana Sprague's collection of baseball memorabilia, and another of landmarks in Guilford, and a fourth of one-room

schoolhouses in Guilford). Viewers can create their own flickr accounts by signing up for a free Yahoo subscription, and then they can add appropriate comments to the photos as well. Thanks to the Guilford students, and to the Brattleboro Historical Society, for sharing these remarkable photos from a Putney-born photographer.



Students scanning photos at the Brattleboro Historical Society

Preserving and Restoring Access to Thwing Mill

Since Frank Wilson's generous donation of the Thwing Mill to the Putney Historical Society in 2002, members of the board have sought funding to improve and preserve the site, and to provide public access. While we are still wrestling with a number of considerable obstacles to this effort, we are making progress. Phase one of our project includes steps to address includes improvements to the building, which is in need of some repair.

Thanks to local builder Scott Henry, we have been able to make a determination of repairs and improvements that need to be made, including roof repair, safety features, site clearing, and access. Combined, this work will cost more than \$20,000. To pay for these necessary improvements, we have applied for matching funding from the Vermont Department of Historic Preservation, and we await their response. We are prepared to pay our share of the cost for this work, and to finish this first phase of the Thwing Mill project during the course of the coming year. *People in the community who are interested in helping out, or who may be willing to donate money or services toward this effort, are encouraged to contact us.*

The other major difficulty that we face is phase two: obtaining legal, safe public access to the mill. Former board member



Thwing Mill in 1985, prior to reconstruction



Thwing Mill in 2002; photo by Lyssa Papazian

Lyssa Papazian worked hard to obtain assessments of the site, and to find a bridge that could span the Sacketts Brook ravine; with the help of other board members, she tried to figure out how to fund the purchase and installation of the bridge, which could easily total more than \$50,000. Through the work of board member Tom Jamison, we have determined that our best current plan is to seek a grant through VTRANS, a state-operated agency which funds such projects. We are still seeking community donations for this project as well.

Once the building is improved and the bridge installed, the Putney Historical Society will be able to offer the town of Putney public access to a building which has immense historical significance, as the only mill building still standing on the original site which can demonstrate an example of the industries that clustered around this short section of Sacketts Brook, where the fall is steep enough to create water power with dams.

The mill will be an important part of a future Sacketts Brook natural and historic corridor, which has been planned by the Putney Conservation Commission, and could stretch from the Connecticut River to the Putney School Forest. This corridor includes the historic Follett Stone Arch Bridge, which the Conservation Commission has already restored.

Volunteers and New Board Member Assist with Electronic Archiving

Many of our members had the opportunity to see and discuss the archiving project that is underway at PHS during our annual meeting in September. We are pleased to report that the process of electronic archiving at the historical society has continued even through the cold months, thanks to the work of volunteers, and new board member Mary Jane MacGuire.

In the late fall, Kristie Wojcieck volunteered for a community service project, spending many hours in our small, transitional Town Hall office, recording archival details of most of our library onto a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

Recently, Landmark College student Kevin

LaBeau has become interested in this project—he has experience working in a museum in his home state of Minnesota; he has visited a number of times, and received training in archival entry. We expect to see more of him over the next few months. Also, we are very pleased to have Mary Jane MacGuire, a librarian who also works at Landmark College, as a new board member. She has brought many ideas, and positive energy, to our board already; and she has also been trained in the process of archival entry at the Town Hall. She has begun a regular schedule of visits, during which she will carry on the process of recording the extensive subject file records in our collection. This is a process that will take more

than a year, even with her regular work, and we are very pleased to have another board member with the interest and the patience for this task. During the summer, we hope to make substantial gains in this effort, and we also offer a general appeal to all community members—including Brattleboro high school students who need to have forty hours of community service under their belts as a requirement for graduation—to come and take part in this sometimes tedious, but frequently very interesting (and certainly educational) project. When we are done, we will have searchable electronic databases to rival any local historical society in southern Vermont!

**PUTNEY
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY**

Newsletter items assembled by:
Stuart Strothman
With contributions from:
Tom Jamison
Laurel Ellis
& Guilford Central 8th graders

Phone: 802-387-5762
email: putneyhs@sover.net
(may soon change to
info@putneyhistory.org)

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www.putneyhistory.org

Putney

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Dear Laurel—I found an historic stone at my house!



Old-time photo of the Dirsmith's

Dear Laurel,

Thank you so much for the old-time photo of the house. Imagine my surprise when we literally unearthed the 1777 rock wall at our house. Here's a close up of the stone while we were cleaning debris. Anything you discovered?

Tim and Claudette Dirsmith

Hello Tim and Claudette,

Your discovery reopened a project I had set aside about 8 years ago and since first hearing from you, I've spent many hours back in the Town vault and at home sorting through notes. I'm not complaining as I love a puzzle and I've found several pieces that had escaped me when last I worked on that section of the village. One thing that kept messing up my mind was that where today's Whites live, in the 1800's, it was Wheelers—AND where today's Wheelers live, there where Whites in the 1800's.

I would be very confident in stating that Jonathan Uran had to be the one who inscribed the date into that rock, having purchased that property in January of that year from John Kathan (who settled by the river in 1752). But the property your house is sitting on remained part of the Charles Kathan farm until his death in 1793; then it became the Alexander Campbell farm until 1839 when it was purchased by the Noyes family, who sold your particular piece, plus land across the road, to Nelson and Beersheba Wheeler. There are references to a shop on the property during the Wheeler era, but I'm not done researching all the details. Also, I want to try to find out more about Uran. I work from the beginning forward and from the present back, and aim to connect somewhere in the middle.

I hope you are planning to leave the wall intact. My husband, Doug, and I also took photos, and marveled at how well that wall has withstood over 225 years! Well built. There are probably many little "treasures" down that bank under the modern junk!

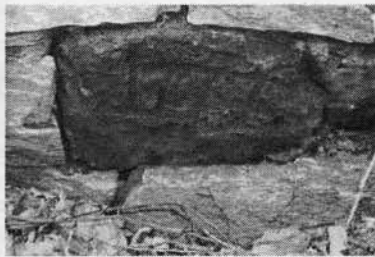
Sincerely,
Laurel Ellis

Recording

by Gray Grandy

He didn't knock off any rebels,
But he was there
Watching
Recording
Through the lens
Of his camera.
Out of a traveling tent
A petite structure
Of white canvas
That carried his life.

George Houghton traveled
with the men,
Smelling the smoke
Tasting the food
But did not know of battle
He knew of a camera
A large, clunky product
Slow to work
The photos he brought back
were stories
Thousands of words
On fragile glass plates he saw
Many years ago
Through the lens
of his camera.



Historic stone in wall off Old Depot Rd