

Putney Historical Society News

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Putney Stories: Sheriff Bill Graham

(The Putney Stories project asks participants to interview one Putney person per year. This writeup is from an interview conducted in 2002.)

For every land where reasonable law is held as the standard for society, there must be people to enforce the law. These people are in a demanding position, not only because bravery and clarity are required as a matter of course, but because a careful balance must be found between law enforcement, peacekeeping, and respect for the constitutional rights of citizens. William Graham, a longtime citizen and well-respected law enforcement officer in the town of Putney, with more than thirty years spent as Windham County Sheriff, seems to have created a comfortable balance in his lifetime. Though many people in Windham may not realize, citizens of Putney have played a very important role in the development of reliable law enforcement, county wide.

Bill Graham came to Putney from New York at the age of eight. His folks worked at American Optical in Brattleboro. As a young man he worked at the Basketville factory, and became a manager there—he notes that many of the young people trying to earn some money in that period either worked at Basketville, or at the mill. He also married, very happily,

Phyllis Austin, with whom he had attended the former central school. He served ten years as a Vermont state trooper, working at an outpost in Fairlee in the fifties and early sixties; also during that period he served as probation and parole officer for

reads 'WILL', and Lawrence A. Washburn, another former state trooper from Putney, had one proclaiming 'LAW'—much to the chagrin of Putney's Lawrence A. Wade, who wanted that plate for his own. In 1963, Graham became first constable of the town of Putney.



William Graham in 1991

juveniles in the Windham area. Up north in Thetford in 1957, he was one of the officers who fished farmer Orville E. Gibson out of the Connecticut River after two months, the victim of an apparent murder.

In the fifties, to ticket speeders, a man had to follow in his car and gauge with his own speedometer. In 1958, when personalized license plates first became available, Graham acquired one that

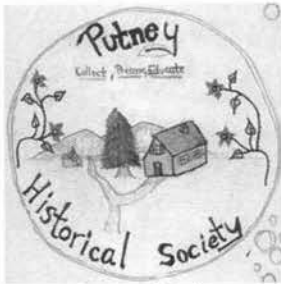
During the sixties he served the town of Putney, primarily as first constable, but also at times as grand juror, agent, lister, and as a member of the school board. As the newly founded Windham College increased in size, he became a very busy man.

As Graham describes it, the College created a situation where a thousand or more young people were placed in a small and fairly conservative Vermont town, in the "middle of the program," as it were. The sixties were a heady time, with communes developing, and politics pitting "the local guys against the college people." Some of the locals gave "just as much grief," as the police had the attitude that as long as the students behaved themselves and obeyed the law, they were not a problem. Still, there was much to do—greatly increased noise, use of controlled substances, and protest standoffs between anti-war demonstrators and conservative supporters kept first constable Graham and second constable Malcolm

New Historical Society Office in Town Hall



Our new photo viewing booth



by Lena Mazel



by Becca A. Potter



by Savannah Baker

(Images above were created by 6th graders at Guilford Central, as part of an ongoing project the group has taken on, helping to prepare a new website for the Putney Historical Society)

Good news! If you haven't seen our new office yet, do make an appointment to come by the town hall to look at it, and to do any research you may be interested in. The office is small but comfortable; it is located in the former ladies' room, on the right hand side of the large upstairs room. We have created a photo viewing booth (it would be fun



A view of the new office at PHS

to take photos in it, too), and we have organized our supplies and reference materials to help expedite your

research. We are pleased to say that the office can be heated, as well!

We would love to see it put into use, so please call Stuart Strothman or Lindley Speers, and come and visit, if only to familiarize yourself with our resources. Or, if you are interested in some volunteer labor, just come by on the first Saturday of the month between 9:30 and 12, and we can put you to work!

Annual Meeting September 23rd at the Community Center

On Sunday, September 23 at 2 p.m. the historical society will host its annual meeting at the Community Center in Christian Square. There will be a multimedia display of the work to date on the Putney Histories project, has involved a significant team effort by various community members, the PLACE project, and the historical society to gather oral histories from significant community members. Following the business meeting, Putney students (probably from Laurie Fichter's class at the Grammar School—we hope to engage the central school students in a fashion show in

January) will interview community elders in small groups, and record their discussions, while other attendees will be free to view display materials, or listen in on interviews in progress.

We are eager to add some new board members—if you have any interest in joining the Putney historical society board, please attend and go ahead and make yourself known to any board member. Also, if you are willing to be interviewed, contact Stuart Strothman, Paul Levasseur, or Meredith Wade. Thanks in advance for your participation!

Accession of Subject Files Completed

Thanks to the hard work of Mary Jane MacGuire and Stuart Strothman, the massive collection of "subject files" has been recorded and electronically listed. This work took well over two hundred hours during the course of the last two years. There are three subject file drawers in the cabinet; Lindley Speers and Fern Tavalin recorded drawer one five

years ago, and the listings there are limited to the folder names. However, the remaining two drawers have archival entries for *every single file!* This makes electronic searching of names, places, organizations or events in the (greater than two thousand) spreadsheet entries a snap. Also, it has allowed us to formally accession the subject files, assigning specific archival

numbers to every single document (or folder, in drawer one). Along the way, we organized the folders, gave them a new set of hanging files and manila folders, and put valuable, original documents into archival sleeves for protection. This is an exciting new resource for researchers of Putney history. Now we truly know what we have, and nothing in the subject files is 'lost'.

Bill Graham (cont'd from page 1)

(Mac) Jones, Jr., busy day and night, and especially in the later sixties, it was hard to get any sleep. Up until the late sixties there were no two-way radios, and the constables would be alerted by a particular light outside town hall, which would indicate that they should call in to see what the problem was.

On January 20, 1969, Graham became sheriff, the only full-time staffer on the force, and was often busy twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, or near to it. Windham was the first county to buy an automobile for its sheriff, a second-hand car in 1969, equipped with a radio owned by Graham. In 1970 the town (*cont'd on p. 3*) contracted with the county sheriff, and Graham hired Mac Jones as the first full-time deputy sheriff, one of the first in the state of Vermont. In 1972 a benefit auction was held, and some money borrowed, to pay for a two-way radio system for the county. The sheriff and the deputies were responsible for maintenance; as Bill says, "each of the guys would do their own oil changes, and fix the equipment. Now we have all modern equipment." Also around this time Graham chaired the original Green-Up Day committee. That first year it was a big job, and the interstate was closed for four hours as volunteers cleaned the trash from the sides of the road. For thirty years since, he has been active in the annual May event.

The construction of jails, which had been a state priority, stopped in the early

seventies, and though a federal prison was nearly set up on the Windham campus in Putney in 1980, it was defeated by the townspeople at an historic special meeting. Graham states that the proposed facility was very nice, and notes that at the time it seemed like he and his wife were the only ones who voted in favor of it. But no local jail was ever forthcoming, and the sheriff and deputies have ever transported up to a thousand prisoners annually to correctional facilities in Rutland, Woodstock, St. Albans, and St. Johnsbury.

Maintaining a county sheriff's department in Vermont requires the mindset of a business manager. Funding for the real needs of law enforcement officers is not simply provided in full from a single source; the state pays the salaries of the full-time personnel and the sheriff, and for the transportation of prisoners. Other personnel must be privately contracted to do road detail. Also, the contractual relationship of different towns and the county sheriff varies quite a bit: Stratton has been required for the past decade (by Act 250) to have officers available full time, and they hire through the county sheriff. Specific contracts for law enforcement (and consequent payment of taxes) exist in ten towns, including Putney, Saxtons River, Jamaica, Stratton, Newfane, Guilford, Brookline, Dummerston, Westminster, and Athens. If, for example, Brookline is having difficulties with speeders or breaking and entering, they will contract with the sheriff, hiring patrol officers for (at the time of this writing) twenty dollars an hour.

Memories of specific incidents requiring the sheriff's intervention across the years include a situation involving a stolen canoe; Graham declared publicly that it had better be returned straightaway, and in the morning, there it was in front of the town hall. Another moment, perhaps the most frightening in all his years, came after a report of shooting from a East Putney neighbor. Walking in the pitch black night, in the place where the shooting supposedly came from, a man placed his hand on Graham's shoulder, startling him. It turned out this was just the property owner, who knew Graham and wanted to say that he hadn't been doing any shooting. But undoubtedly, some of the frequent issues that Graham and his deputies have to deal with, such as domestic violence, are potentially dangerous. Another less frightening but difficult problem has involved parking; in the early eighties when parking regulations to make plowing easier were put into effect prohibiting parking on roads or overnight in the villages, many arguments arose among Vermonters who weren't used to such limitations of freedom. Even now, parking regulations continue to be difficult to enforce. Other problems needing regular attention include breaking and entering, speeding, and complaints of speeding in different locations in the county. On repeated occasions in the past years, students driving on River Road have managed to destroy his split rail fence, which he has rebuilt over and again. Still, Graham manages to find humor in such misfortune, and this quality, along with (*cont'd on p.4*)

No Move to Pierce's Hall

In case you haven't heard, the board of PHS, having received input from our membership during the last annual meeting, determined that the historical society could not coexist with the monthly contra dances held at Pierce's Hall. The East Putney Community Club was very generous to offer to share the space of the Hall, especially considering the historical society's recent difficulty in finding a place to settle down after moving out of the downstairs of the Town Hall to make space for town offices. However, after a lengthy study of the space, the board determined that moving out of the town center to create an office and display

area which would need to be packed up every month would not be a good choice. We will continue to serve the town from the Town Hall for the time being—the geneology files and important reference texts are still located in the accessible downstairs, and our main collection of documents, books, photos and artifacts is currently housed upstairs. We are endeavoring to clear the space in the large upstairs room so that it can be freely used by various organizations (and we would love to have volunteer assistance, especially high school students who need to complete community service before graduation).



Pierce's Hall, 1932

**PUTNEY
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY**

Newsletter items assembled by:
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We're on the web!
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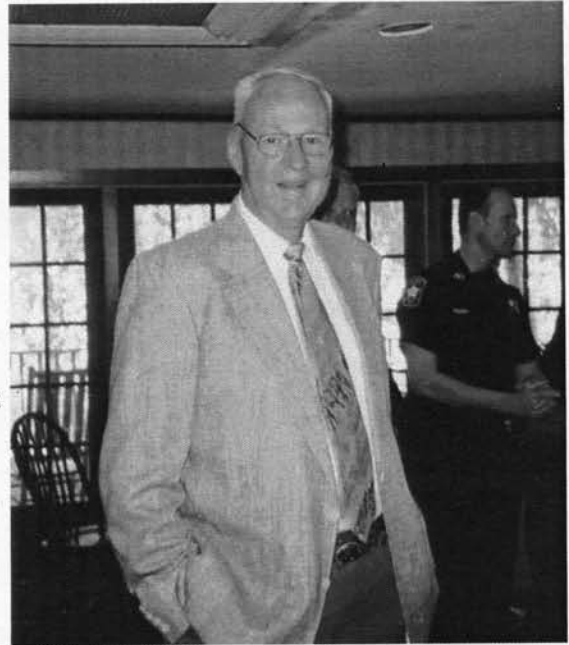
Bill Graham (cont'd from p.3)

(cont'd from p.3) fairness and reliability, have led to real popularity—even the editors of the *Brattleboro Reformer*, endorsing Henry Farnum's rival Sheila Prue, described him as "popular" (Nov. 2-3, 2002, p. 4). This popularity kept him in his elected office for three decades. He was even invited recently to a twenty-five year reunion of Windham students.

Even more importantly, he has brought considerable professionalism to the position. Officers who apply for county positions are required to have a high school diploma and criminal justice training from the state of Vermont; there is also a psychological exam, a record check, and even a polygraph, which is not usually required in Vermont. Then there is a personal interview involving the sheriff and a local citizen from one or another town served by the sheriff. Dave Hannum and Mike Muscat of Putney have both served on this committee on different occasions. Many of the leaders in the department, such as Graham, Mac Jones, Henry Farnum, and John Melvin, have undergone a twelve-week FBI training program in Washington, taking advantage of some of the best police training available in the United States. To increase awareness of speeding, a decade ago the Windham Sheriff's Dept. was the first in the state to acquire the trailers which can be placed at the roadside to notify drivers of the speed they are traveling, compared to the actual limit. Now the department has five, at a cost of \$9600 each. These trailers reflect the ethics that underlie effective law enforcement in a town-governed, community-minded place like Windham County; that if the citizen is made aware of the law, and can understand why those laws are in place (trailers are often situated, for example, at public schools), the citizen will make an informed decision not just to obey the law, but to be considerate of others in a general way. That way we all can have safety, and as much as possible, good relations with our neighbors.

—S. Strothman

Thanks to Bill and Phyllis Graham, for the interview, and review of this article.



Retirement party, 2002

Tom Jamison Publishes Article on Arrowhead in PHS Collection



Two obsidian points from the Gerald Coane collection. The one on the left is discussed in this article.

PHS board member and archeologist Tom Jamison recently published an article in the *Archeology Journal of Eastern North America* on an arrowhead (point) which was donated to PHS in the early 1970s by Gerald B. Coane reportedly "found on the shore of the Connecticut River." The obsidian point in question was tested at the University of Missouri Research Reactor Archeometry Lab in Columbia, Mo., and the Northwest Regional Observation Studies Lab in Corvallis Oregon. The studies determined that the point was in fact prehistoric, made before European contact from a site known as the Double H site in the northern Great Basin near the Oregon/Nevada border. Researchers were, of course, unable to determine how it came to be in the Connecticut Valley, and to verify that the report of its discovery along the Connecticut River was actually true. It was determined by the authors that its movement to the Connecticut River during prehistoric times was "possible" but "highly implausible." A distilled (four page) version of Tom's article will be available at the PHS annual meeting.