

Hartland Historical Society

December 2006

We are all familiar with Damon Hall, situated in the center of Hartland Three Corners, but what do we know about the Damons for whom it was named? Bev chanced upon an article that whetted our interest and so we pursued it further and found a most fascinating man and family. As I've noted before;, Hartland is full of them !



WILLIAM EMERSON DAMON

... ..” As this building, Damon Hall, which we dedicate today is a memorial to Luther and Betsy Thayer Damon and to their children, and especially to their son, William Emerson Damon, through whose generosity the gift of this building has been made possible, a short sketch of Luther Damon and his son William E. Damon would seem appropriate. Luther Damon, son of Aaron and Lucy Emerson Damon was born in Reading, Mass. Dec. 17 1795. When 10 years old he came to Vermont to settle on the farm now known as the Damon Farm. He was married to Betsy Thayer of Braintree, Mass Nov. 15, 1819. (He sold the Hartland farm and moved to Windsor but after a few years he became homesick for the old farm and bought it back, never to leave it again. He built the present Damon house about 1845.) Ten children were born to the couple.

William Emerson Damon, the youngest son was born in Windsor in 1838. He was educated in the public schools and at Kimball Union Academy. Feb 14 1865 he married Alma Otis of Windsor. For many years Mr. Damon was superintendent of the credit department of Tiffany's, New York City. Largely through his efforts the New York aquarium was established and Mr. Damon came to be considered an authority on matters pertaining to aquaria. His interest in the New York aquarium is referred to as follows in "Bermuda, Past and Present" by Walter Brownell Hayward." No less a personage than Phineas T. Barnum was the first to introduce Bermuda fishes to the New York aquarium public. Barnum, ever on the alert for new thrills, conceived the idea of bringing live specimens from tropical waters, and sent out two expeditions, one to Honduras, the other to Bermuda. Both returned without their fish, all having died in transit. Barnum was disappointed but was prevailed upon by one of his assistants, W.E. Damon, to fit out the well-smack Pacific which sailed to Bermuda in the summer of 1863. These being the days of blockade runners, all Northerners were regarded with suspicion and soon it was rumored that Mr. Damon in his frequent trips across the bays was taking soundings, not fish. Finally a peremptory order from the authorities halted his work and it was not until the American Consul had intervened on his behalf was Mr. Damon allowed to resume his harmless occupation. His party caught 600 fish, all of which were successfully transported to the greater glory and profit of Barnum and the pleasure of his patrons of the Ann Street museum

Mr Damon's "Ocean Wonders" was published in 1879, was one of the first books to popularize life at the seashore. This book contains besides descriptions of various kinds of marine life, a chapter on marine and fresh water aquaria. All of Mr. Damon's sisters were interested in natural history but he says in his preface to "Ocean Wonders" that it was his dear and honored sister, Elizabeth with her suggestive spirit and practical example who awakened in his mind a love for nature. He also acknowledges his indebtedness to the intelligent and sympathetic interest of his wife in his favorite study. Because of Mrs. Damon's interest in her husbands avocation she has become interested in the Hartland Nature Club and has felt it a pleasure to contribute towards this building.. Mr Damon never held public officeHe died on the home farm in 1911

From a speech by Harold Rugg at the dedication of Damon Hall on Dec. 2, 1916 reported in The Vermont Standard



Barn at Damon Farm, Route 5, near Windsor Line.

Assorted bits from our files

Mrs. Alma C. (Otis) Damon, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Otis, was born in Windsor, Vt., July 30, 1841, and died in Hartland, Nov. 7, 1928. On Feb. 14, 1865, she was married to William E. Damon, who for many years prior to his death in 1911, was identified with Tiffany and Co. of New York and maintained a summer residence at what has long been known as the Damon Farm in Hartland. Mrs. Damon was a great lover of nature, and during her life in New York, she and her husband were identified with several societies offering opportunity for the study of trees, plants, flowers, and especially of marine life. Since her husband's death, Mrs. Damon has spent a part of every summer at the farm where she could enjoy to better advantage the natural beauties which the country affords. Her funeral was held at her late home on Friday afternoon, at 2 o'clock, Rev. E.L.M. Barnes of Brownsville officiating.

Although Barnum had aquatic mammals and native freshwater fishes on exhibit in the American Museum in New York City, this was nothing new since The Boston Aquarial Gardens had such exhibits before the museum did. Damon convinced Barnum that what the museum needed was a collection of colorful saltwater fishes and so Barnum financed Damon's famous (and hazardous) trip to Bermuda in 1863, the source of the shells in the Hartland Nature Club. He and Albert Bickmore who accompanied him (Bickmore at the time was a young student of Louis Agassiz and was later to become the primary founder of The American Museum of Natural History) were the first two to bring tropical marine fishes into this country. Those shells in the Hartland Nature Club are, therefore, of considerable historical interest and should not be viewed simply as shells from Bermuda. My research on Mr. Damon centers around his scientific endeavors and aquatic research. Mr. Damon was a much more learned and scientific individual than most people realize. He was a member of the New York Microscopical Society, The Royal Microscopical Society of London, the New York Micrological Club, the Scientific Alliance of New York, the New York Naturalists Club, and the New York Zoological Society. If it wasn't for his impressive success as the credit manager for Tiffany's in New York City, he undoubtedly would have become a well known figure in the scientific world. Mr. Damon was also very important in the establishment of the Boston Aquarial and Zoological Gardens, as well as persuading P.T. Barnum to add an aquarium department to the American Museum. Mr. Damon was also consulted when the Battery Park Aquarium was established in New York.

In 1861 the Boston Aquarial and Zoological Gardens secured a white beluga whale and brought it to Boston. It was kept alive for about one year and, although Barnum displayed several white whales, contrary to what has been written, the Boston whale was on exhibit before those in the American Museum in New York. The whale was placed under William Damon's care while he was at the Gardens so he was the first one in this country to tend to a whale in captivity!!

The thought struck me that another member of the Damon family has another claim to fame. Damon gave the following account of early American aquarium activity in his "Ocean Wonders" book "In this country I believe the writer was one of the very first to be inoculated with the aquarial passion – a passion that has grown with time, and has a deeper hold today than even in the first period of magnificent visions.

So far as I have been able to ascertain, the pioneer inductor of the private aquarium in this country was Miss Elizabeth Emerson Damon, of Windsor, Vt.; and her first essays were made with the simple apparatus of a two-quart glass jar, with a few fish, some tadpoles and snails, and some Potamogeton (common pond weed): but so perfectly balanced was this young aquarium with animal and vegetable life, that I fell in love with it at first sight; and never since, among all the aquarial curiosities which I have possessed, and the thousands I have seen, has there been a collection nearer perfection than that contained in the poor old two quart jar." Albert J. Klee, Ph.D.

The New York Sun of May 9 (1899) says "W.E. Damon read on Friday evening before the New York Microscopical society a paper on the seahorse, the wonderful little marine animal with a head and neck bearing a strong resemblance to those of a horse, while its tail is prehensile like that of a monkey. Mr. Damon exhibited a photograph of a seahorse which he had kept alive in his own aquarium for over a year. This seahorse was very tame, and would readily take food from its owner's hand. The paper from which the above is taken contains a full and interesting synopsis of the lecture on this marine animal. No one in this section need be told who Wm. E. Damon is and our only regret is that our space will admit of no further quotation".

Other notes from our files

Luther Damon lived on the farm that bounded on the Hartland Windsor town line. He was born Dec. 17, 1795 and died Nov. 28, 1872. Buried in the Old South Cemetery in Windsor Village. Howland Atwood.

Letter March 26 1823 from James B. Sumner (brother of David of Hartland) Dalton, N.H. to Nathaniel Page (Hartland) "We are in great want of good settlers. If you see Luther Damon tell him I had expected he would have been up here before this. We want a real Teamster"

Mr. Luther Damon had a beautiful farm on the opposite side of the town near Windsor. He made many trips to Boston with produce, and the garden kept by Mrs. Damon and her descendants is one of the loveliest of it's kind. Nancy Darling

On Jan 11, 1845 Mr. Leonard H. Hamilton of New York City wrote to Luther Damon, Esq. "I was very glad to hear a good account of my stock I do not care how much they eat as long as they do not waste " Nancy Darling

I hope you agree that these little peeps into lives lived so long ago serve to broaden and enrich our lives today C.Y.M.

And on a different note... A poem by Daniel Cady written in 1929

NAMING OF THE BROOK

“ Good evening , Sister Brook, yon island is your care,
But I prefer your banks, I’ll build my mansion there;
I guess we’ll get along, if both of us play fair.

“This lady is my wife and these my children four;
They’re all I have just now although I’ve asked for more;
I hope they’ll all grow up to sail a boat like Noah.

“Miss Brook, you have no name? That’s stingy, I declare!!
I’ll give you part of mine, I have a piece to spare;
There’s no grand reeve to mind’ no constable to care.

“Wife, fetch that bottle here, that old junk jug of glass,
I want Miss Brook to be no nameless sort of lass’
But on the other hand, first water and first class.

“I ask the wilderness to listen now and look;
“Bottle, I break your head with this my boating hook;
Miss Brook, from this hour forth your name is mine-Lull Brook “

Bev has talked of sharing. Many of you have been most generous over the years with your gifts to the Historical Society Without this generosity, this wonderful sharing, we would not be the organization that we are today. And so, I would like to thank the following for their gifts.

Recollections for My Family – by Edwin Denison Morgan from Bill Flanagan, 1942 8th grade graduation picture from Martin Persons. Photos(copies) of Rev. Daniel and Mrs Hannah Breck, also Breck geneology, Dan’l Brecks commission as Chaplin in Rev. War and other papers from Mathilde Duffy (descendant). Old Home Day 2006. Book of Photos from Rosemary Morancy. Dance program Aug 23, 1919, “Bar Haven” drama, Feb 25, 1910 from Leon and Marjorie Royce. Bound copy of Hartland section – Business Directory 1883-1884 from Rosemary Morancy. Iron stove from Hartland R.R. Station, maps, diaries (1930 and 1961) books, picture of Hartland R.R. Station, school pictures (Windsor High School and band) Records of Hartland Brass Band 1884 all from David and Joyce (Hoisington) MacKenzie. Picture of Holt house letters to Nancy Darling from Adeline Sturtevant and Flora Miller from Lillian Marcotte . (Typed copies have been made and donated by Rosemary Morancy). Video of Mt. Ascutney interviews by Barbara Rhoad, given by Beverly Lasure.

Carol Mowry

President's Message

Since the last newsletter we've had lots of good and interesting things happen at the Hartland Historical Society.

The Save Hartland Artifacts Responsibly for Everyone (SHARE) concept has begun to work very well. Several people have volunteered to help do things and as a result we have photographs of every gravestone in the Walker, Center, Jenneville and Densmore Hill Cemetery, as well as maps of the stones locations and transcriptions of the information on the stones. Many thanks go to Whit Mowry and Jim Avery for their dedication to the job. The pictures and information will be available soon on our website as well as being available in a booklet on each cemetery in our archives. Over the years many stones have disappeared due to deterioration and this project should make a lasting record as the stones slowly erode. (The new website: www.hartlandhistory.com)

Marie Kirn kindly donated two large ski area signs that were in her barn. While one pertains to Mt. Ascutney the other is from the Sugar Brook Ski Tow here in Hartland. We are actively seeking home movies or photos as well as any recollections anyone has of the ski area (particularly what sort of a tow was it?) . In conjunction with the gift of the signs we have arranged a program to be held on January 14 at the Hartland Library and put on by the Vermont Ski Museum. They are actively seeking information on all the small mechanized ski areas throughout Vermont and would like to document as much information as possible on each one. We will be inviting Woodstock, Windsor and West Windsor to participate in this program. If you have anything to loan us to display or anything that we could copy to use for this we would appreciate hearing from you. I attended a program that the Vermont Ski Museum put on in conjunction with the Island Pond Historical Society and it was very interesting even though I didn't know a single person there or the location of the 2 ski areas that they were researching. Their displays consisted of many newspaper clippings, photos, old skis and boots and uniforms from the 10th Mountain Division.

We have shared much information on the Sumner family with the Dalton (N.H.) Historical Society. The Sumner family was prominent in Dalton and they were very happy to receive the copies of letters written by Mrs. Sumner to her aunt here in Hartland.

The 2007 Calendars are ready for sale and are available at the Town Clerk's office, the Hartland Historical Society, and by mail or phone call to Carol Mowry at 436-3383. Cost is a donation of \$8 plus \$2 for postage and handling if necessary. The theme of this year's calendar is places that are no longer there and you will find some very interesting photos.

Please let us hear your suggestions for upcoming programs (SHARE your ideas).

Bev Lasure, President