

The Paxton Historical Commission wishes to thank the Audio Journal for the opportunity to acquaint listeners with the history of Paxton. We also wish to thank early audio interviewers Joan Bedard, Jason Fanning, and past members of the Commission along with the elderly residents who gladly shared their memories of Paxton's past. References from Paxton's Past Revisited, the Paxton Local Historic District Study, Paxton Historical Commission calendars 2004-2011, the Paxton Historical Commission website, and untitled archival documents in the Historical Commission's collection form the basis for this program. We also wish to thank the Paxton Cultural Council for supporting the audio recordings of Paxton's elders.

We hope you will enjoy learning more about our once "typical New England village".

OUR TOWN PROGRAM  
AUDIO JOURNAL JUNE 30, 2011

PAXTON, MASSACHUSETTS:

*"Up a long and winding highway...Paxton softly calling from the hills"*

**A town that "calls softly from the hills" is how Paxton was once described by Daniel Woodbury in 1961. Residents and visitors alike have all shared this sentiment as they pass through the small town that lies northwest of its biggest neighbor, Worcester.**

**The earliest settlers were among those colonists who founded our country and helped establish its government, included among them were artists, builders, legislators, boot makers, farmers, and craftsmen.**

**Settlement of central Massachusetts was delayed for some time due to difficulties with the indigenous Native Americans. The major Native Americans who lived in the region before any white settlers had arrived in the early 1700s, were described as the Nipmuck Indians and were known to hunt and fish on Turkey Hill Brook. Due to its dramatic 90 foot drop down a steep gorge, Turkey Hill Brook was also the site of several early mills that took advantage of the strong water power it created. The Nipmuck Indians were said to have camped on Asnebumskit Hill and, according to some reports, to have left various rock cairns, indicative perhaps of important tribal sites. Paxton's last Native American was remembered to be Aaron Occum. Using typical native tools, he was known to hunt and fish in the area and traded his handmade baskets and brooms from his home near Turkey Hill Pond. Occum also occasionally entertained local families in their homes with his stories of an earlier time. Legend has it that while returning from one of these visits on a cold winter evening, he was injured and succumbed to a fall.**

**Although there were numerous occasions of wars, sporadic massacres and uprisings, eventually white settlers prevailed. When there were long enough peaceful periods, settlers were finally able to establish several of the neighboring towns: Leicester and Rutland in 1713 and Holden in 1740. Since the first settlers of Paxton were very religious, one of their major concerns was to have access to a suitable house of worship. The inconvenience the settlers suffered from of traveling long distances to worship in the churches in these distant towns led an increasing group of local inhabitants to petition the general court for the formation of a new town.**

**Their petition cited ..." 'the great difficulty they labored under in attending public worship, in consequence of the great distance they were from its place in towns to which they belonged.' "**

Undaunted after their initial attempts in 1761 and 1763, the settlers were finally successful with their fourth attempt on February 12, 1765 when nearly equal two mile stretches of land from Leicester and Rutland were combined to form Paxton. In February 1804 and April 1839, additional territories from the boundaries of Holden were also annexed to into the Paxton boundaries. It should be said that the current land area of modern day Paxton is approximately fifteen square miles.

As necessitated by their growing population, the town residents voted in April 1765 to build a central meeting house on an original cow pasture belonging to Seth Howe. This land would now serve as their town common. A building was constructed in 1766 and remained on the common until being moved to its present location in 1835. Eventually the meeting house served as both a religious and a municipal center.

The residents voted to name the new town in honor of Charles Paxton, a Commissioner of Customs in Boston. In return, he promised to give the town a church bell. For reneging on his promise, he earned the quotation:

*“Charles Paxton, although polished in manners, and of pleasing address, was an intriguing politician, and despicable sycophant, every man’s humble servant, but no man’s friend.”*

When he attempted to enforce the stamp and revenue acts, Charles Paxton proved himself to be a devoted Tory. Legend has it that he was even hanged in effigy from the Liberty Tree. Eventually he departed with the British troops and found it necessary to flee to England. The name of the town now became a source of great embarrassment to its residents. In 1775, inhabitants petitioned the General Court to make a change, but to no avail. Indeed, even in the late 1880’s there were those who felt that it was not too late to change the name of the town.

Although there were undoubtedly loyalists among the citizenry, the town has always been proud of the degree to which it supported the revolutionary cause with money and supplies, as well as men. Thirty three local Minutemen fought at the battles of Lexington and Bunker Hill, and over one hundred men, including three of African descent, eventually joined the ranks of the Continental Army. In the early years of the Republic, the failure of the government to reimburse locals for supplies requisitioned during the war led some Paxton men to join Daniel Shay’s Rebellion.

A period of some uncertainty gave way in the 1790’s to a period of optimism and growth, which resulted in the construction of many new homes in the Federal style. In the 1820’s, the growing local boot and shoe industry ushered in a period of modest prosperity. Many townspeople found work in local factories and entire families were enlisted to do piece work in their homes, producing “brogans” for the slaves of the South, for the Civil War’s Union Army soldiers, and for the settlers of the newly opened West. Boot making was an important part of home and farm life. The end of the civil war, the demise of slavery, the loss of government contracts and the destruction of the largest boot factory in town by fire in 1873, brought an end to the boot trade. The town population fell from almost 900 in 1870 to around 500 at the turn of the century. With the continued industrialization and overcrowding of the cities in the later part of the 19th century, the fresh air, open spaces and beautiful views that rural hill towns such as Paxton had to offer made them popular places of retreat. Several inns including the well known Paxton Inn and the three story Summit House catered to the needs of stagecoach travelers, visitors and vacationers, and in the 1890s, the even larger Kenilworth Hotel was built. In the last quarter of the century, various important civic improvements were made in the town with the building of a separate town hall and a new school. A library was added in 1923.

**For almost one hundred years, until the suburban building boom in the 1950s, Paxton remained primarily a farming community.**

**The Ahearn family had maintained a farm in Paxton for generations. George Ahearn described some aspects of typical farm life.**

George Ahearn: Mother and all the girls in particular used to pick blueberries, up on the hill, a great blueberry patch . They would bring them home and put them in boxes. Father and mother would bring them to Worcester and sold them for 10 cents a quart. I don't know how many quarts she picked and what she couldn't sell, she'd can.

We used to pick apples. There was a little orchard down there and we used to pick apples. Bags and bags and bags of them. Put 'em in a wagon and we used to bring them over to [Andrew's] on Paxton Road, had a cider mill and he used to make cider in barrels, I don't know how many barrels, 15 or 20 barrels of cider down in the cellar and that was for the hobos that used to be around in the winter time or even in the summer time and father would pay them off in cider. So when the cider was gone, the hobos were gone. We used to bring a lot of apples up there. I think we had 50 gallon barrels of cider down in the cellar.

We had an ice house and we used to stack the ice in there and put sawdust all around it so it would keep. We used to use that to keep the milk cool. Before we put ice in it, father, I remember, would put em down the well. We had a well, and put ropes around them and would hang them in the water and about every two days there used to be a dairy, Prentice's dairy, that's Hassy Prentice's father out by Tatnuck, and we used to bring the milk down there to process it.

N: Did you sell milk or was it only for family use?

GA: Well we sold milk that we got from the cattle that we brought down there. And then after that we began selling it to Smith and Fife. We used to have to bring the milk up to the center of Paxton. And you know what it was like in the winter time, we had a sled and the horses would fall down and break the harnesses. Oh what a time. But we made it through it I guess.

**Another prosperous farming family in town was maintained by the Urbanovich family. Frank and Doris describe life on the farm.**

DU: We used to get up in the morning and try to cut I'd say half a ton and we used to weigh it and tie it in boxes and brought it down, but you had to be there at 4 o'clock in the morning to unload, that was rhubarb. And raspberries, you wouldn't believe it, 5 cents a pint. And we had crates and crates and crates of it that we shipped.....5 cents a pint.

DU: All the children would get in there and pick the raspberries and box them.

FU: We used to go through pickin' the raspberries and my father used to go...when we got done he would go underneath and find two or three more pints...another 5 cents, 10 cents.

N: Well that was important.

FU Well at that time maybe.

**DU** The smaller children did under the bushes and the older children did the rest.

**FU**: Rhubarb was our big event. We did almost a ton. The milk was on par with them. I remember the days when my father first started we got two wells on the farm. He would put string on the handles of the jugs. That was our cooler. That was the milk cooler that we had....we had a stick across to hold it up until we got the real cooler. But at that time...them days.... And haven'. In our days, we worked...and we would go out and mow what we can..and if they say it's going to rain ...like pa would say: "Go out there we gotta stack it up...stack it up." And when it got done raining go spread it out to dry again.

**Aleck and Rose Urbanovitch had similar memories of the farm,**

**RU: A whole acre now. We didn't have that in the beginning. We had it in the backyard. Didn't have room, so we bough it the land from Mr. David, Aleck David, and I raised everything from. My husband plants everything, he does the heavy work with the tractor. He's got a rototiller.**

**N: And you grew vegetables?**

**RU: Yes, and I canned about 300 jars a year and I made jam.**

**N: And you used it throughout the winter?**

**RU: Yes**

**AU: And when you were 5 or 6 years old, milking cows, you had your own 4 or 5 cows every morning and at night you had to milk. That was your chores. And then you go to school and then you have your chores again, and of course, your father would be around to watch you to make sure you did everything. But we had cows, pigs, chickens, horses, everything. We had everything on the farm. But when the 29 crash came, we were living on the farm and we had plenty of food, we didn't even know there was a crash on as far as as eating because we killed our own animals, you know ducks, geese whatever else we wanted we had it and, of course, we didn't have ice boxes in them days so you cut ice in the wintertime and stored it and that was the ice you could use to cool everything down in the summertime, we had our own ice house, and we canned the meat besides, my mother would can and make Polish sausage and we would kill a cow in wintertime so then we smoked the meat and all and put up so much of that. And that's how we lived. We were all brought up that way.**

**Today Paxton is more a bedroom community than a farm town, the population has increased exponentially with housing developments taking the place of fields and meadows. Still, the town possesses much of its original 18th and 19th century character, especially around the town common.**

**The town still maintains several of its earliest and historically most significant structures. Probably the most iconic colonial image exists in the form of the First Congregational Church. It also served as a meeting house when it was built in 1766 and was eventually moved from the middle of the north side of the Common on October 21, 1835. Its construction was unique in that the pews were placed to face the front entrance. Some theories state this was perhaps a deliberate variation on typical church construction in an attempt to help settlers be more prepared in the event of an attack by Native Americans on the town. In spite of Charles Paxton's failed promise, town did, in fact, eventually acquire a bell for their steeple. David Davis went to Boston with a pair of oxen and carried to Paxton the bell now in use, which was made by the Paul Revere Foundry. Reverend Henry Cover from King's Chapel in Boston officiated as a**

temporary preacher for the new congregation with services being held in a resident's home. Until the subsequent appearance of the First Congregational Church's first preacher, the Reverend Silas Bigelow of Shrewsbury in late 1767, another resident who kept school in town also preached for several months. The beauty and dignity of this colonial church are forever preserved on the Paxton town seal, first created in the early twentieth century.

Many historically and architecturally significant structures still grace the area surrounding the town common. John Snow's tavern, the site of the first town meeting where locals voted on whether to establish a new town and the Penniman house, once the home of the patriot Capt. Ralph Earle, personally commissioned by George Washington, and his son Ralph Jr., the great American painter, are but two of the homes from Paxton's earliest period.

Examples of homes in the Federal style may be seen through out the town. The Jenkin's house on Davis Farm Road, the "Crow Hill House" on Pleasant Street, and the Tyler Goddard house on Richards Avenue (which is pictured on the town seal) are typical well preserved examples. The period of Paxton's boot industry is especially rich in homes in the Greek revival style. Many structures in town are the work of three local builders: Col. Willard Snow and the brothers, Jonathan Prescott and Silas Newton Grosvenor. The house of Ledyard Bill, writer, local historian, and member of the State Legislature, is located on Pleasant St., and one of 28 houses built by Snow. Several homes on Richards Ave. also have majestic tall Doric columns, were used in the boot trade and are fine examples of the Grosvenor's classical style.

In 2006, six important municipal sites were included in the Paxton Local Historic District to encourage their continuing utilization and preservation. They included the Paxton Town Hall, the Town Common, the Center Cemetery, the White School Building, the Records Building, and Richards Memorial Library. A brief word about each of these properties gives interesting insight into the growing community.

1) In 1888 the residents voted to erect a Paxton town hall. Along with \$1500 from the estate of Simon Allen, after whom they named the large auditorium, they voted for the raising of \$1000 at their annual town meeting. Land was donated by Mr. Ledyard Bill, town historian and state legislator. Construction began in July 1888 and was completed by November.

The Town Hall structure is a rare example of the short-lived (1860-1890) Victorian Stick Style architecture as demonstrated by unique architectural features such as "sticks" (flat clapboard banding) in geometric and carved patterns, large trusses under gable roof eaves, and simple porch and window railings that emphasized pattern and line rather than three dimensional styles.

It served Paxton not just as a meeting hall and the center of municipal offices, but also as a public library after it was moved from the basement of the church, a town jail with the construction of what was once called "The Tramp Room" to confine occasional wandering vagrants or inebriated residents, and the official police department. The Paxton Fire Department also stored their ladders, buckets, and hand chemical extinguishers in the basement of the town hall for many years. Also until the White Building School was completed, the town hall served as a centrally located school.

Etta Robinson, one of Paxton's leading citizens describes the municipal duties in the early town in her own words.

**ER: 1915 when I was married, my husband was Town Clerk. I was appointed Assistant Town Clerk. So**

from then on until 1944 with the exception of 1916 or 1917, there was another Town Clerk. And then my son was Town Clerk after that when his father passed away. There still was Assistant Town Clerk.

N: What do you remember about the Coolidge election? The fact that you were the Assistant Town Clerk.

7:11 ER: I was thinking of the population. Probably wouldn't be more than 200 or 300.

N: Where was the town clerk's office then?

7:58. ER: Right here in the house.

N: In the house? Not down in the Town Hall?

ER: Oh yea. That wasn't put in down there until 19...sure it was under my son, so he was Town Clerk for 15 years after his father, 15 years after the end of the war.

N: So it was 1960. So the Town Clerk's office hasn't been there so long.

ER: Down there, no.

N: What did they use the rooms for on the first floor of the Town Hall.

8:49. ER: It was the Selectman's office.

N: Where it is now?

ER: Yes. It was a library. The rest of it was used for a dining area with a small kitchen. The other side of the front door was the assessor's office. That's all the offices. The rest of them were scattered around different places that were homes.

The annual town meetings were also very different than what we know of them today.

N: What do you remember about town meetings?

11:30. ER: Well of course my husband was Town Clerk and he had originally to go to the Hall and set it up the day before, of course. And then the morning of the Town Meeting, at 10 o'clock in the morning when they came in and he had to be there for voting at 7 in the morning because people came in from the outskirts of town to leave their milk for the man that collects it.

N: Where did they leave the milk?

ER: In the very center of town, there was a small store and usually the xxxx was there to collect it. And then the town meeting began at 10 in the morning so they could get most of it and then the Ladies Social Union put on dinner. And they would be through by 3 in the afternoon so the men could go back home to do the chores. And in the evening we had what we called the Town Meeting Dance and that was just local, a woman at the piano and a man with a violin and it was just the local people and the winning candidate gave out cigars to the men and candy to the ladies.

N: Besides the roads and the schools, what else did they talk about at these town meetings? What about the

electricity and the water?

**14:10. ER:** Oh that didn't come in until 1914. The electricity, and the water until 1935 I would think.

**N:** Were there still gas lights on the common?

**ER:** Kerosene because they had no gas here.

**N:** There were lights on the common.

**ER:** There were posts for the kerosene and someone had to go around with a short step ladder and light them around 4 or 5 o'clock in the evening.

**N:** Did the town hire a lamplighter?

**ER:** Yes.

**N:** Do you remember who that was?

**ER:** At one time it was my husband and another time it was a Mrs. Mathews.

**One of Paxton's other elder citizens Viola Prentice had her own fond memories of those meetings.**

**N:** And what do you remember about those town meetings?

**2:45 VP:** The fights. Between my grandfather who was road commissioner and some of the people who didn't think he was paying enough attention to their particular road.

**N:** And how were these fights resolved? Or were they a perennial event?

**VP:** Well, I think you came to expect them, yes. But I don't know how they were finally resolved, unless the Moderator did it.

**N:** Now as grammar school students, did you know beforehand, what the issues were? That were going to be debated or did you just come to see, or for the show?

**VP:** We were probably told, but I don't think we remembered, we were so interested to know who was going to get into the next fight.

**One of Paxton's Town Moderators, Mr. J. Arden Woodall, has additional memories of past town meetings.**

**Mr. Woodall:** Of course there is only one annual Town Meeting, but I may say that when I first started quite frequently, we had a hold over. It got to be midnight before we called it off, and it went on the next day. And quite a lot of that was caused because of the fighting they

loved to do on the floor of the Town meeting which they do in a different way now. So there was just the one annual town meeting, it might take one evening or two, and sometimes three.

Throughout the years, the town hall has served as the main gathering place for many societies and social groups including the Lyceum Debating Society, The Village Improvement Society, the Grange, The American Legion, the Ladies Social Union, and the Helping Hand to name just a few. The Ladies Social Union was established in 1824 when seventeen ladies of Paxton realized the need of improving the mind and aiding in charity work in the town. They called it “The Female Reading and Charitable Society” and was Paxton’s oldest society. They met every fortnight at each other’s homes, sewed, worked for the church and other worthy causes. Their reading was described as religious poems, essay, and memoirs, no fiction.

Today the Paxton Women’s Club founded in 1930 also strives to support worthy causes in addition to helping young scholars through scholarships, while still planning enjoyable events for the community, as well.

In 1936, Paxton officially became a part of the new parish, Christ the King Church erected in the Tatnuck area of Worcester. At a special town meeting, Paxton residents gave permission for Catholic masses to be held in the town hall every Sunday at 9:15AM. This practice remained until the early 1950’s when St. Columba Church was built adjacent to the Town Common.

Many socials and dances were also held upstairs in Allen Hall. In 1888, dances including the quadrille, contra, waltz, military, gallop, tempest, Virginia reel, jig, and Arkansas traveler would be enjoyed by many participants with dancing going on from 8PM to 1AM. For many decades February 22 was viewed as a very special day in Paxton. Annually residents would celebrate with “the big dance”, even when in 1902 a raging blizzard ended up stranding most of the revelers until horse drawn plows could rescue them the next day. Musical entertainment in the town hall also included programs of piano solos and duets, harmonica medleys, and violin solos. Local residents were generally encouraged to share their talents in plays and shows.

Until the 1950’s an Annual Christmas Eve party was held in Allen Hall. All town organization and churches participated by decorating a huge Christmas tree with hundreds of lights and raising funds by canvassing door to door for donations to pay for the big event.

Callie Stone, a member of a family who has lived in Paxton for many generations, remembers the Christmas gifts:

14:25CS: I don’t know if anybody told you about Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve was very special in the town of Paxton. At Christmas Eve all children were invited to the Town Hall and I think the age was maybe 12 from infants, and we would go up there and we would sing Christmas carols and jingle bells and all those and here comes Santa Claus. He would come in and every child got a huge, great big orange and a box of candy, hardy candy, a cane and a present. That was Christmas Eve, every child. And one year mother was chairman of it and the man came here to show her all the toys. While he came into the living room like Santa Claus. He put the toys all over the floor. We just went crazy and mother picked out all the presents for the different age groups. They were all done up. I don’t know who did the presents, probably the women.

N: Who paid for all these?

CS: Different organizations. The Boys Club and the Village Improvement, women’s



**groups and the church. Because then we only had a Congregational Church. But it was a special, special event.**

Although the current use of Allen Hall has been severely restricted due to the lack of adequate accessibility, many town residents are hoping that one day in the near future they will again be able to use the hall as it was originally intended.

2) The Town Common was the center of early Paxton life evolving for a cow pasture to the location of the first meeting hall before it was moved to its present location. Currently the Town Common serves as the site of many traditional Paxton Holiday festivities, such as Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, the Christmas tree lighting with caroling, and the annual Paxton Festival in the summer. Located on or adjacent to the town common today are several monuments erected to the memory of the heroic men who fought in support of America. In the center of the common stands a tall granite monument that was erected in 1871 and contains the names of twenty-one men who died during the Civil War. It was once surrounded by an iron fence that was a gift costing \$300 from the Ladies Social Union. A Howitzer cannon stands at each corner and they were donated by Congress. Each gun was placed facing directly into the ground as a sign of the peaceful settlement of war. There were also monuments to commemorate those who died in World War I (dedicated in 1929), World War II (1944) and the Korean and Vietnam Wars (dedicated in 1993). In 2009 a list of 92 names consisting of all of Paxton's war heroes was compiled by town historian Ed Duane. Drawn mostly from town and state records, it included some 35 Revolutionary War minutemen from a town that had a population around 800, mostly farmers at the time. Sadly, in recent times there was also the need to erect a new monument on the town common to commemorate the death of the town's Chief of Police, Robert J. Mortell who was killed in the line of duty in 1994.

Ed Duane, modern day Paxton historian for over many decades, relates an interesting fact about the original Common.

**Ed. D.: Also at that time when they bought land for the church, they bought land for the Common. The Commons is just what it says. Common land. Any resident in town had the right to bring his animal down, cow, pig, whatever it was, horse, to graze on the Common. The only trouble is it caused quite a lot of trouble. Nine times out of ten the Common is situated near the cemetery. And knowing a cow, more so a cow, when a cow gets a bite on its head, it wants to scratch it someplace and what do you do? Oh yes, there's a gravestone over there, so he starts scratching his head on a gravestone. Well the gravestones started to tip, and that was raising Cain with the stones.**

3) Paxton Center Cemetery has been recognized for its unique history. The first burial in the Cemetery was in 1769. Since that time it has been the site of internment of residents and veterans from the American Revolution, the French and Indian Wars, the Civil War, the Spanish American War, World War I and World War II. It contains over 850 head and footstones that are slate and marble included among them is the headstone of Reverend Silas Bigelow which has been depicted in many books and described as one of the most famous and

unique early American headstones. Many of the 145 slate stones from before 1830 also bear unusual and picturesque burial symbols such as the willow and urn, the winged soul effigy, the casket, hourglass, flowers and vines, and skull and crossbones. A picturesque stonewall constructed in the late 1800's still encompasses the cemetery today.

The one man responsible for much of the documentation and preservation of the Paxton Center Cemetery was Ed Duane, a D Day World War II veteran and town historian for several decades. He worked tirelessly to compile a detailed list of all Paxton men who lost their lives in battle for the U.S. armed forces. It was through his efforts in the years between 1983 and 2005 that the Paxton Historical Commission with the help of the Paxton DPW was able to procure and set eleven veterans' gravestones. In addition, three badly deteriorated Civil War gravestones were replaced, and a monument memorializing three revolutionary war veterans was erected. In 1994 he also helped honor with memorial markers, the graves of Major Moore, Amasa Earle from the war of 1812, Charles Howe, a veteran of the early indian wars, and Prince Thompson, a black soldier of the American Revolution.

Here are some of Ed Duane's views on the Center cemetery:

**E.D.:** The Cemetery was active from 1769, even up to the present date, but the cemetery has been closed for burials or sale of lots, except some of the families still have burial rights, the last burial being some two or three years ago. And you can see the changes, from the slate stones that marked many of the early cemetery graves to the white marble which came in about 1830 to the present marble and granite statues and cemetery headstones and monuments. And that covers a period of almost 200 years. We are fortunate to have some of the works of the early stone carvers in the cemetery. Being the period that the cemetery starts kind of toward the tail end of the period of symbolism on the stones. Because Puritanism was the one that started the symbolism and it was carried on not possibly because of the belief in Puritanism but because of the individual's belief. The symbolism could have two or three interpretations, but it would still be the basic interpretations that the Puritans had going into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the early stone carvers was Young. He lived next to Logan Field on Mill Street. The house is still there. He was very active in Worcester. He was a surveyor, a farmer. He was also a stone carver. The only trouble is he used very poor materials. And some of his stones are deteriorating very fast. The first minister of the church here was Silas Bigelow. And he was ordained and taken sick about the second year into his ordination and he died. He's got a beautiful stone. The stone itself is know nationwide because of the symbolism. It's too bad it wasn't better material. But because of symbolism, it shows a symbolic face of the minister with the wig. In the one hand he's holding the Bible and in the other hand he's pointing. He's standing in back of his pulpit and it shows the strings which mark the places in the Bible which would be on the pulpit itself. Then it goes into a big story about his life. And it's done, not in a crude way. He was a beautiful carver. And so I would say we have in the cemetery probably 15 examples of what William Young had done. There are other carvers. The (Soule) family has a couple of examples. A fellow by the name of (Kilburn) from Sterling who used green slate. We have a few examples there. And then we have one stone with the carver's name inscribed on it. His name was Parks and was not done too often. The carvers very seldom identified their stones. But John Parks happens to be on this one here. Some of the early symbols we don't have because the cemetery's too late, but we do have two stones that show the surety of death with two skulls. And then the surety of the rise of the soul to heaven after death which is

denoted by a pair of wings on each side of the effigy. The soul's effigy represents the individual buried whose name is on the stone and the wings are significant to the soul rising to heaven. We have a few of those in the cemetery. Then in 1915 they came out with a standard willow and urn, and we have some outstanding examples of the willow and urn. The symbolism to the willow and urn is that the urn contains the remains of the departed and the willow represents the weeping of the people left behind or the surety of everlasting life, because if you cut down a little tree, you don't take the roots out, it's going to come back. I don't know. We have tried and tried to understand why they used those two, but we were never able to come up with a reason why they came up with that particular design, but they're beautiful. And none of these carvers copies each other. So it's interesting to see and there are few books, but just walking through the cemetery, so much history. You have the burial of the fellow who went down to Boston and brought back the stone. And the burial of the first state representative. The burial of the woman who sold the land to the town and also her father, Tyler Goddard. They had 5 or 6 individuals who operated the mill in Moore State Park. We had a doctor, a noted doctor out in Cincinnati, he was a Professor also and he made giant steps in ether. And we have many veterans of the revolution, right up through WWII. It's an interesting historical trip without going anywhere else you find history about Paxton.

4) The White School Building was constructed in 1898 when the town residents voted to incorporate the five small scattered existing school districts into one large central district. In 1893, it cost \$1000 that was raised by the sale of lumber from the town's forest on Howe's Farm. It was built by A. Dwyer in 1898 and opened in the autumn of 1900. The original two story building was composed of four rooms each containing three different class grades. There was entrance on the right for boys and on the left for girls. The first student body consisted of 60 students and 6 teachers. Paxton joined the combined school district of Holden, Rutland, and Oakham in 1898. In June 1901 the first graduating class of six students prepared to enter Worcester High School. Subsequent elementary graduations were held in Allen Hall along with an occasional celebratory turkey dinner. After being used for 39 years, an increasing population necessitated the addition of four more rooms in 1929. Even during a painful depression, the citizens managed to raise \$25,000 to help improve their children's education through building expansion. Numerous later additions followed until in 1985, the expanded Center School was designated as separate from the aging White School Building which was now given by the School Committee to the town for other uses. Today the White School Building serves as a meeting place for most municipal boards, the Council on Aging, and the Paxton Historical Commission along with its many artifacts and historical documents.

5) The Records Building (1899) is a small brick and masonry structure with a slate roof that was paid for from the will of Charles Boynton, a prominent resident, on land donated by Ledyard Bill. It was built to be fireproof in order to protect the early documents of the town and currently still stores many original historical papers.

6) Richards Memorial Library was constructed in 1926 through the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Ellis Richards in order to enable the town residents to have a facility for maintaining and distributing current and past literature. Many of the early books were their personal collections. Due to increasing population size, an addition was necessary in 1977. Today the Library serves as a vital part of Paxton town life, not only for its large collection of books, but also for the many instructive and varied programs presented for

residents of all ages.

The first school librarian, Viola Prentice, has additional memories of the library in town.

**VP: I would like to tell you about the early library in the Town Hall. The first Paxton Free Public Library moved here from the basement Sunday School Room in the Congregational Church where it had been for eleven years, since 1877. The entrance to the new library was on West Street where the Police Office outside door is now. It included part of the area of the Selectmans Office and the present rest rooms . It remained for 38 years until completion of Richards Memorial Library in 1926. Library books were loaned out only one at a time. You could not take another book until the first was returned. The library was open 2 ½ hours a week, on Saturday, 3:30 to 5 and 7 to 8 pm. The library stocked very popular Zane Grey and Harold Bell Wright westerns. Also the complete set of fiction titles by Gene Stratton-Porter. It boasted a real floor to ceiling rolling ladder for returning books to the top shelves. I was one of the eager-beaver kids always willing to help Miss Rena Robinson with this chore.**

Although most people admit that every town's history is made up of the efforts of all its citizens, there have been several people who have done much to help Paxton grow, thrive, and develop a character of its own.

One of Paxton's earliest renowned citizens was Major Willard Moore, whose home still exists in Paxton. At one time he was known to have marched on the Worcester courthouse with others to protest England's heavy hand on the colony. An eager Minuteman, he and others with similar views met at the Paxton tavern before marching east toward a meeting with the British. He was known as a brave patriot who was killed in June 1775 at the Battle of Bunker Hill. He is even immortalized in a painting of the Battle of Bunker Hill by John Trumbull. According to later Paxton resident, Herbert Wentworth, "The gallantry of Major Willard Moore has not gone unnoticed. ....He was a firm patriot, a generous and chivalrous soldier. On the second attack he was shot .... until time of retreat and feeling his wound to be fatal, he requested his men to leave him. He met with a soldier's death on the battlefield."

Many years after his death, a large picturesque property within the Paxton town limits was sold to a wealthy Worcester family, the Spauldings, who were prominent in the city's business district. Reportedly, when Mrs. Spaulding first saw the land, she named it "ENCHANTA", because she felt it must have been enchanted because it was so beautiful. Being an active member in the Worcester Garden Club and the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, she expanded a planting process that entailed the addition of many new and different rhododendron and azaleas. When the Spaulding Estate was purchase by the Department of Natural Resources, it was named in his honor as Moore State Park.

Today Major Moore's name sake has been described as a jewel in Central Massachusetts. Moore State Park is a beautiful historic landscape of nearly 750 acres that is managed for the quiet enjoyment of its natural and cultural resources. It was purchased by the state in 1965 and has been open to the public since 1966 from dawn to dusk throughout the year. While twenty-five years ago there were 15,000 visitors to the park, today that number has increased to many tens of thousands. It was an active mill village from 1747 into 1927. One of the five

original schoolhouses also exists there as a one room school house built in 1826 to serve the growing families in the mill village.

Moore State Park may also contain one of the oldest mills in Massachusetts and New England that is still standing on its original site. It was restored in 1983. The brook that long ago powered the mill consists of a 94 foot long passage with three waterfalls and cascades descending a quarter mile down a rocky gorge lined with a huge array of dry stonework. The stone work at the mill wall is felt to be the largest dry laid stone foundation that exists in New England.

In 2001 and 2002, a rustic Artists' Overlook was constructed with a scenic view of the mill and falls that has been an inspiration for hundreds of photographers and artists who have stopped to capture its beauty and the hundreds of hikers who have enjoyed its beauty.

The Paxton community has always taking their love of the park to heart. Eagle Scouts have helped build trails and Girl Scouts have weeded and fertilized the chestnut tree orchard there. **In addition, for the last eleven years, the AmeriCorps has sent a group of trained graduate volunteers who are educated in conservation skills to work long and hard hours for several weeks to clear, prepare, and stabilize old and new trails for future hikers and to prune and plant shrubs.**

A unique research collaboration also exists between Moore State Park and the Broad Meadow Brook Wildlife Sanctuary with the construction of a new bat shed house, a home to 600-900 maternal bats. The bats have lived on the property for many years and have been studied by Boston University for over 20 years.

Another worthwhile partnership Saint Vincent Hospital in Worcester and Moore State Park was recently begun, the first of its kind partnership in Massachusetts, with the creation of the Healthy Heart Trail. The purpose of this easy to moderate walking trail is the basis of a cardiovascular fitness and prevention program. To date over 2000 miles have been logged by Paxton residents and their neighbors in this healthy way to get exercise all year long, in effect using tranquil picturesque trails as one's own tread mill.

In 1985, Moore State Park became a member of the Massachusetts Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. This membership has allowed the Park to purchase rare and unusual specimens of rhododendrons to add to their existing stock. Today Moore State Park has the largest collection of rhododendron in New England, numbering 15 thousand plants. The beauty of this massive floral display was often celebrated during a "Festival of Flowers" weekend every May.

The American Chestnut Society which has dedicated itself to the prevention of the American chestnut tree eradication by an imported fungal blight in the early 1900's has become a presence in the park as well. In 2003 Moore State Park became one of nearly two dozen chestnut tree research centers in Massachusetts. Approximately 250 American chestnuts trees planted by volunteers were crossed with more resistant European chestnut trees. After deliberate exposure of healthy seven year old trees to the blight, surviving seeds will be saved and cultured in the hope that some newly acquired characteristics in the tree would prove beneficial to re-introduction of a healthy resistant American chestnut tree.

Understandably, in 2004 Moore State Park was chosen as being worthy of inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places because it conserves the site of a rural 18<sup>th</sup> century



sawmill village that was later landscaped by the additions of thousands of flowering plants into a private estate by the Spaulding family.

In every way imaginable, it is obvious that today's Moore State Park is a fitting tribute to one of Paxton's earliest patriots and heroes, Major Willard Moore.

One of America's first great painters, Mr. Ralph E. Earle was a highly talented artist who was the son of a Captain in the Continental Army. After visiting the recent battle field of Lexington and Concord in 1775, he painted four battle scenes that were among the first of this type of work painted in America. Nevertheless, he was still a Tory at heart who refused to fight against England's forces and eventually fled for his own safety to England in 1778 where he remained for seven years. **Although little remains of his pre-flight work, his portrait of Roger Sherman, a man of humble beginnings who rose to significant social and professional levels, showed his skill at conveying the character of his subject. While in England he studied with masters such as Joshua Reynolds and Benjamin West. Being a talented craftsman, he was able to effectively combine formal portraiture with the spirit and passion of America's painting. The end result was often a unique style reflecting the vitality of the American people. In later years upon his return to America, his landscapes were known to expertly capture the true nature of the rustic scene. Currently his works are displayed in many museums across the country and beyond.**

Possibly, no one person did more to affect the history of Paxton, than its most prominent resident for over decades, Ledyard Bill. He was born in Ledyard, Connecticut. As a State Senator, he proposed and helped fund the first public library including many of his own books. A generous philanthrope, he also helped in the funding and construction of the Paxton town hall and facilitated the paving of early roads to help allow greater transportation and communication between Paxton and its neighboring communities. As a devoted local historian and author he also devoted himself to preserving Paxton's past by its compilation in his book, *History of Paxton*, written in 1889. He describes the early town belonging to a class of "hill towns" of the state, in that the village common had an elevation of eleven and thirty-five feet above the sea. He clearly documented the growth of the all important boot making industry in Paxton from its start in 1829 by John Partridge through subsequent men who acquired large fortunes from this industry. **Bill also documented what he felt were endearing natural qualities of Paxton, including the chance for visitors and tourists to**

**"breathe again. The wholesome and health invigorating air of these primeval hills and valleys. From the top of Asnebumskit, on a clear day, a score of towns may be seen..."**

In 1923, another book dedicated to Paxton's history, *Landmarks and Memories of Paxton*, written by Roxa Howard Bush, another Paxton historian, was a short but detailed book that carefully described not just genealogy of its current citizens, but also specific events such as the 1915<sup>th</sup> anniversary festivities and parade to celebrate Paxton's founding. Poems were written and read, dances were held and all residents enjoyed the town's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. **One of its inspired residents, Mr. George Maynard, even composed an anniversary poem... part of which reads.**

## ANNIVERSARY POEM

by George Maynard

O Mother Town of ours, this day  
Brings joy and pride to thee;  
And radiant smiles upon thy brow  
Our eyes with pleasure see.

Paxton! thy name sounds sweet to us,  
Thy children gathered here,  
On this, thy anniversary day,  
To show our love sincere.  
We lay our tributes at your feet,  
Fair town that gave us birth;  
Our eyes no holier, lovelier spot  
May ever see on earth.

Another influential member of the Paxton community, Ellis Richards, was also originally a non-resident who only visited in the summers when the cooler mountain breezes attracted many vacationers. He was not alone in his love of the cool mountain air. Paxton became so much of a desirable summer escape from the city heat, that by the early twentieth century, Camp Pike was established in town on the shores of Asnebumskit Pond. Early photos show an expanse of various sized quaint rustic cottages where owners and their guests could enjoy the refreshing summertime water.

Later Richards was so delighted with the region that he purchased one of the finest structures in town and settled here. He had Rutland Road which is now Richards Ave paved and improved the area with the construction of stonewalls and the planting of many large shade trees. In 1919 he proposed the construction of a new fireproof building on the former site of his original home to allow for greater access to books by the community. In October 1926, Richards Memorial Library opened its doors to the public.

Throughout the years, numerous other talented men and women have maintained homes within Paxton's boundaries. Florence Morton, a spiritual woman, sought to protect the peace and tranquility of what would one day become Moore State Park with the preservation of the old saw mill and the initial planting of rhododendrons and azaleas. David Clark was an aerospace engineer, who studied fabric weaving, thereby enabling the development of his spacesuits later used in early manned space flight. Andrew O'Connor was a gifted sculptor whose talent created a famous statue of Abraham Lincoln for the Illinois Statehouse along with many works residing in museum around the world. John Bishop developed a construction company that built everything from a courthouse to mansions in New Port to the acclaimed Chapel at West Point. He was also the guardian and uncle of the famed poet, Elizabeth Bishop, who in 1956 was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for a collection of poems called *Poems: North & South/A Cold Spring*.

Modern day Paxton also boasts the presence of Anna Maria College, a four-year, private, co-ed, Catholic, liberal arts institution accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. Founded by the Sisters of Saint Anne in 1946, the College is located on a 190-

acre campus just minutes away from Worcester. The center of Administrative activity in the college is called “Socquet House”, after Sister Irene Socquet who was its second president. A Georgian-style farmhouse, it was built in 1750 by Silas Newton. The building was also once called “Sunset Farm” and “The Colonial House. Today, Anna Maria College provides education in many disciplines including art, business, criminal justice, environmental science, and legal studies and is also a member of the Colleges of Worcester Consortium, a group of 12 local colleges. Anna Maria College is especially proud to be home to the nationally known Molly Bish Center for the Protection of Children and the Elderly. It was established in 2004 by a foundation created after the tragic death of young Molly Bish. The Center’s purpose is to help enhance Anna Maria College’s mission of community awareness and service through education and training. **Its ultimate goal is the security of the young and the old through relevant and newly innovative programs. Over the last two years, Freshman classes at Anna Maria College have continued with their commitment to community service by choosing Moore State Park as the recipient of their efforts. With a total of nearly 2000 man hours of labor, they successfully deposited 19 tons of crushed rock on new hiking trails which were then covered with 5 tons of wood chips.**

As with many New England towns, numerous historic structures and landscapes have been lost with the passage of time whether through deliberate new construction or accidental calamity such as fire. The thriving busy hotels of the past were nearly all lost to fire and on February 27, 2001 an early morning fire destroyed the much loved Paxton Inn. Shortly after its construction in 1759 by Jobiah Clark, it became a regular stop for the passengers on the Barre-Paxton-Worcester stagecoach to rest and refresh themselves. For a time in the 1920s, it changed from a hostelry and inn to a home for the Massachusetts State Police Mounted Patrol Headquarters. Returning once again to an inn and restaurant, it was the center of Paxton life until its untimely destruction.

The site of the village blacksmith on Pleasant Street, along with numerous old general stores, and several old historic homes near the town common have also passed into memory, having been replaced by new modern structures and even a parking lot. A totally unique part of the Paxton community that has been gone for decades was the much enjoyed Paxton Navy Yard. The Paxton Navy Yard and Brick Steam restaurant was established in 1930 by Sam and George Clapp. The Navy Yard was dug as a large pond and on it floated a mechanical battleship of the latter’s design, constructed from available boat parts. There was also the unusual Clapp Animal Farm to delight and excite children of all ages with peacocks, and a variety of wild o interesting animals. At one time a catchy theme was even written that said:

“Avast there, skipper, dock me in, no longer shall I roam;

For all around the world I’ve been, but now I’m heading home.

This port’s ok, no matter though its sea is soil-hard;

I’ll anchor here and spend my dough in Paxton Navy Yard.”

There has always been some explanation of how the Paxton Navy Yard got its name. As humorously described in Ledyard Bill’s history book, there may be a historical reason due to something that occurred in the late 1800s. A stagecoach with a full of complement of



passengers was traveling toward Paxton Center in the late fall. They all were nearly “tumbled” with laughter when a furloughed sailor passenger, who had “at least three sheets in the wind” asked if the barely visible shore of a small Paxton pond with its numerous barren tree trunks looking like ship masts was the Paxton Navy Yard. Apparently this often told joke lived on for generations.

Since its establishment nearly 250 years ago as a small New England village of only a few dozen settlers, Paxton has grown into a town of over 4500 residents. Although it is true that like most modern towns and cities, Paxton has lost some pieces of the puzzle that make up its heritage; nevertheless, it is also true that many feel a renewed sense of commitment to the preservation of this historic New England town.

Today’s Paxton has admirably managed to retain a charming rural character that after fifty years can still be described by the concluding lines of Mr. Woodbury’s poem.

*“So if one is worn and weary from the strain of constant care  
And would seek a place of quiet a spent body to repair,  
Try the hills and sun-clad valleys where the soul all nature thrills  
Such a place is dear old Paxton  
Softly calling from the hills.*