

Colorful Characters

JOHN CAPEN "GRIZZLY" ADAMS (1812-1869)

CHARLTON, MA * SITE 1

Grave stone erected by his friend P. T. Barnum in the Bay Path Cemetery on Rte. 31 in Charlton, MA.

Remembered as a true western frontiersman, John Capen Adams was born in 1812 in Medway, MA. Although he was trained as a cobbler, Adams went to work for a company of showmen who gathered wild animals from New England and put them on display. He was badly mauled by an animal and unable to hunt for a time. In 1849, he went west in the California Gold Rush. Adams tried mining and claimed to have gained and lost several fortunes. He also developed a distain for human company.

In 1852, he went into the wilderness vowing to live his life among animals. However, he adroitly came up with another money-making scheme. He established a hunting camp and killed bears and other wild animals to sell their meat and hides. Adams also captured living specimens to sell to circuses and exhibits. These encounters often left him with serious injury. In a famous battle with a grizzly bear in 1855, Adams subdued the animal but was left with a hole the size of a silver dollar on the top of his head.

John Capen Adams kept grizzly bears as pets and was recorded as having visited San Francisco with two of them; one named Ben Franklin was heeled and walked on a leash beside him. With Ben Franklin and another bear, Sampson, Adams opened a zoo in San Francisco called the Mountaineer Museum but this venture failed also. Once again, he landed on his feet, becoming a performer and partner in P. T. Barnum's shows.

"Grizzly" Adams died in 1860 from meningitis attributed to the reopening of his head wound. His friend Barnum erected a stone in the Baypath Cemetery in Charlton, MA, to mark his grave.

"Grizzly" Adams is remembered as a fearless mountain man, but also a reckless killer of grizzly bears who eliminated the species from a significant portion of California. His life was the basis of a popular television series in the 1970s, called *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*.

Diablo The Magazine of the East Bay. "Hunter for Hire." http://www.diablog.com/archives/view_story/482/ (accessed December 6, 2007).

Town of Charlton. "Cemetery Commission." <http://www.townofcharlton.net/cemetery.htm> (accessed December 6, 2007).



WILLIAM LINCOLN HIGGINS (1867-1951)

COVENTRY, CT

William Higgins was the Father of the Dirt Road Bill, perhaps an unusual distinction but one of great importance in 1931. Born in Chesterfield, MA, Higgins graduated from the University of the City of New York with a medical degree. He moved to South Coventry, CT, to practice medicine in 1891. In addition to providing medical treatments, William also served in the Connecticut General Assembly from 1905 to 1927 in non-consecutive terms, and was the town's first selectman from 1917 to 1932.

The Connecticut Dirt Road Bill was passed by the General Assembly in 1931. The idea was to improve rural roads by allocating money from receipts of the Motor Vehicle Department. For the first six years, \$18 million was divided equally among all 169 Connecticut towns, a sum of \$106,508 each.

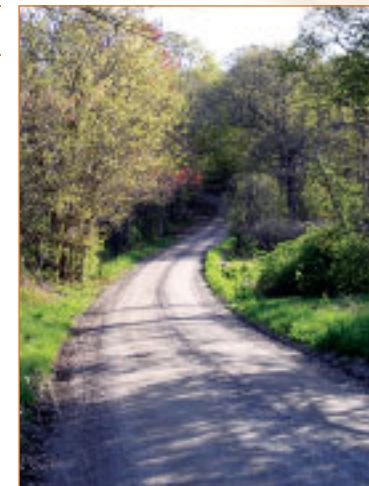
The roads program worked well for several years until the General Assembly proposed reserving a portion of the funding for "other than highway purposes." In addition, the General Assembly passed a reorganization act in 1937 that transferred the powers of the Highway Department over to the Public Works Administrator. Residents were alarmed that the General Assembly would divert the essential road improvement funds and this gave birth to the Connecticut Rural Roads Improvement Association. It was incorporated by a group of concerned folks from across the state, led by William L. Higgins.

Membership in the Connecticut Rural Roads Improvement Association was \$1 per person for the year of 1937. "We trust that the motorists of the state will appreciate our efforts in helping to promote their happiness and prosperity by providing better rural roads which are a benefit to towns and cities alike by joining this organization. You are cordially and earnestly invited to unite with us in a work that has benefited more people in more ways than any Act of the General Assembly of which we have knowledge."

The Association brought a friendly test case before the Superior Court to get an interpretation of the original Public Act, as it was their opinion that the action of the General Assembly was contrary to the intent of the Dirt Road Bill and not in the best interests of the state. Their opinion was upheld by the Superior Court and the Supreme Court. The funding and the administration of the Dirt Road Bill were kept intact thanks to Mr. Higgins and his fellow members of the Connecticut Rural Roads Improvement Association.

Dr. Higgins went on to serve as a Congressman for two terms but then resumed his medical practice. He died in Norwich in 1951.

*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress. <http://www.bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=H000580> (accessed March 4, 2008).
Arnold Carlson*





RUFUS MALBONE (1824-1884)

POMFRET, PUTNAM, CT * SITE 2

The monument for Rufus and Dolly is privately owned but may be seen from Rte. 44 in Putnam, near the Pomfret town line.

Rufus Malbone was a freed slave who lived in a modest dwelling on the hill between Putnam and Pomfret. He earned a living buying and selling produce, and his wagon was frequently seen on the roads in northeastern Connecticut, pulled by his beloved horse, Dolly. He had a mortal accident and, while on his deathbed, his thoughts were only about Dolly's future welfare. He died on October 12, 1884, from the effects of the accident. Dolly was despondent and no one could handle her. Several of the neighbors met to agree on her "disposition." Rufus' grave was opened and Dolly was called to the site. She was shot and buried with her master. A marble obelisk marks the site and is inscribed: Rufus G. Malbone, Died Oct. 12, 1884, Aged 60 years, 7 months and 20 days. Dolly, His faithful Horse, Died October 25, 1884."

Sally Rogers

LORENZO DOW (1777-1834)

COVENTRY, CT * SITE 3:

Methodist Church, Grove St. (Rte. 12) Putnam, CT, is near the site where Dow preached in the "grove."

A well-known itinerant Methodist minister, Lorenzo Dow was born in Coventry, CT, on October 16, 1777. According to John Warner Barber, an early nineteenth century historian, Dow was extremely eccentric, "For if ever there was a man who feverishly rowed his boat through the waters of life with only one oar in the water, it was 'Crazy Lorenzo' Dow."

Rev. Dow traveled throughout the United States perhaps as many as twenty times to save souls, as well as through Canada. Making three voyages to Ireland and England, he was popular and drew enormous crowds. "It is thought, and not without reason, that during the 38 years of his public life, he must have traveled two hundred thousand miles," wrote John Barber.

Lorenzo was a notable orator with a notorious hell-fire-and-brimstone delivery. His charismatic nature combined with his evangelical mission to produce showmanship of the highest order. He was a masterful story-teller with a long inventory of anecdotes to support his preaching. The legends of Lorenzo Dow are many and it is probable that a large percentage is true. His wild appearance, complete with a long reddish beard,



was accentuated by a harsh, grating voice and abrupt gestures. Lorenzo would often appear unexpectedly at the exact minute of his oration, having scheduled the sermon well in advance. One legend recounts how he delivered a four-hour oration, shut his Bible with a resounding snap, jumped out an opened window and into the saddle of a horse waiting below, then galloped out of town.

Dow apparently loved his first wife dearly. When she died at an early age he had her well-wrapped in lengths of wool and buried standing up without a coffin to facilitate her ascent to heaven.

According to scholar Donna Jacobson, "In my research I have found Lorenzo Dow to be indeed an eclectic individual, but also one who had a significant impact on antebellum society. Besides founding numerous churches in the Deep South, he was nominated for President by the State of Virginia and held company with some of the more prominent politicians of his time."

*Donna Jacobson, University of Connecticut
Louisiana Conference of the United Methodist Church. "Lorenzo Dow." <http://www.iscuo.org/dow.htm> (accessed March 12, 2008).
Smith, Candi. "History of the Methodist Church in Northeast Connecticut." 2006.*



CORNELIUS "CONNIE" MACK (1862-1956)

E. BROOKFIELD, MA

Although he once played baseball as a catcher, "Connie" Mack is best known as a baseball team manager. He directed the Pittsburgh Pirates from 1894 to 1896, and Milwaukee from 1897 to 1900. Connie controlled the Philadelphia Athletics from 1901 to 1951, when he retired at age 88. Early in his career with Philadelphia, a colleague called the Athletics a "white elephant" that no one else wanted to coach. Mack adopted the elephant as his mascot and the symbol is still used today by the Oakland A's.

At the time Connie Mack began his managerial career, baseball had a rough reputation. He helped to bring respect and integrity to the sport he loved so much. Nicknamed "the tall tactician," he gained fame as a dignified gentleman who won five World Series and built two amazing teams. The Athletics won four pennants in five years from 1910-1914, and three in a row from 1929 to 1931. Connie Mack still holds the record for wins by a manager, a total of 3,776.

Mack was born in East Brookfield, MA, on December 22, 1862, and died in Philadelphia. He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame by the Veterans Committee in 1937.

Baseball Hall of Fame. "Connie Mack." http://www.baseballhalloffame.org/hojers_and_honorees/hojer_bios/Mack_Connie.htm (accessed August 16, 2006).



THE RAY FAMILY (circa 1850)

GRISWOLD, CT

In the mid-nineteenth century, tuberculosis was called “consumption” for the disease’s progression from a lengthy, consuming illness to eventual death. No cure was available. Lemuel Ray died from this disease in 1845; his father, Henry Baker Ray, succumbed in 1849; two years later another son, Elisha, was stricken by the same disease and died in 1851.

The family was understandably devastated and just a little bit superstitious. When the third brother, Henry Nelson Ray, came down with consumption, the family felt that the dead members of the family were taking their sustenance from poor Henry Nelson—a case of vampirism. So they went to the cemetery, dug up the deceased Rays’ bodies, and burned them on the spot to protect the still-living son. The incident was reported in the *Norwich Bulletin* in the May 20, 1854 issue.

Henry still died of tuberculosis, but his remaining siblings lived to old age. Unfortunately, three of his children perished from unidentified causes sparking more conjecture that vampires continued at work. The fear spread. In at least one other burying ground in Griswold, bodies were disturbed and reburied in other cemeteries, sometimes in curious recon-figurations that included arranging bones in a skull-and-crossbones motif.

Anthropologists have confirmed that vampirism was a common belief among New Englanders, particularly when consumption was the cause of death.

Mary Deveau Sledzik, Paul S. and N. Bellantoni. “Bioarchaeological and Biocultural Evidence of the New England Vampire Folk Belief. American Journal of Physical Anthropology. (1994):269-274.

SARAH GRAY (1819-1892)

LEBANON, CT * SITE 4:

Sluman Gray’s burial site is in the Liberty Hill Cemetery, Rte. 87, Lebanon, CT.

When she was only nineteen, Sarah married Sluman L. Gray, a very successful whaling Captain. Sarah is one of an interesting sisterhood of women who kept house and family not on a farm or in a village but on and beneath the decks of a ship. This life choice was not endorsed by the standards of appropriate behavior in Victorian New England. Sarah must have been a free spirit, devoted to her husband and family. During her life, Sarah gave birth to eight children, three of whom were born on shipboard. Sadly, five children died before the age of three.

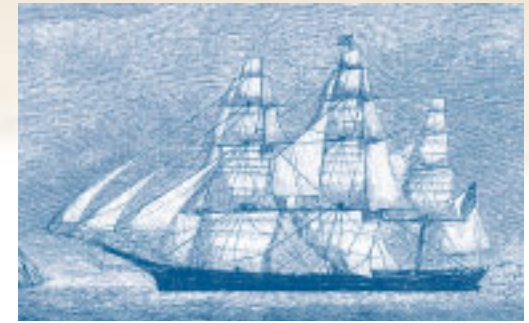
Based on diary accounts from members of the crew and other whaling wives, Captain Gray was a dichotomy: he evidently loved his wife and generously provided

every comfort for her; at the same time he was a brutal commander who dealt out severe punishments for even minor offenses.

The Grays set sail for the last time on June 1, 1864, with their three children. After a nine-month voyage, they were still not at their hunting ground destination in the Pacific Ocean and Sluman became ill “with an inflammation of the bowels.” He died two days later. He was not buried at sea; rather, his body was fit into a cask and covered with some kind of spirits to preserve it for the long journey home to Lebanon for interment. Sarah and her family returned to New Bedford, or at least, that is the point where she paid for the shipment of the cask to Liberty Hill Cemetery in Lebanon where it was buried. Mrs. Gray did not return to Lebanon with her husband’s remains until March of 1866, nearly two years after the voyage began.

Sarah moved nearer to her sisters in New York and she died in Rosendale, NY, in 1892. She was the epitome of bravery, taking care of her family under the worst of circumstances many thousands of miles away from home.

Rhineland, David. “Sea Captain’s History Makes Salty Mystery.” Hartford: Hartford Courant, April 24, 1998.
Wayland, Alicia. “A Whaling Family in Ulster County.” Ulster County (NY) Genealogical Society Newsletter, April 1997.



CONSTANT SOUTHWORTH (1730-1813)

MANSFIELD, CT * SITE 5

Mansfield Historical Society, 954 Storrs Rd. (Rte. 195), Storrs (Mansfield) CT, offers changing exhibits on town history.

Constant Southworth was quite an amazing person. He was born April 15, 1730 and died on December 19, 1813. During the interim 83 years, he served his community well and his record is a testament to the importance of the volunteer spirit in rural life.

Constant Southworth was elected as town clerk on December 6, 1756, and reelected each fall for the next fifty years. In 1806, the new town clerk, Edmund Freeman, wrote “Constant Southworth, Esq. Who had served the town in capacity of Town Clerk for about fifty years, presented an address to the meeting, in which he manifested a desire not to be reelected to said office... it was unanimously Voted – that the Select-men be a Committee to wait on him, the said Constant Southworth Esq. to present him the thanks of the meeting for his long and very faithful service in said capacity of Town Clerk; and also to present him with twenty dollars as a present or gratuity for his extra service in said office.”



While that achievement is significant, it is only a part of Constant's service to Mansfield. While Southworth was town clerk, he was also elected town treasurer from 1794 to 1804, a period of ten years. From 1775 to 1787, he served twelve consecutive terms as selectman, again elected each fall to the position. Yet again these facts represent only a fraction of his work on behalf of the community.

Constant Southworth was elected justice of the peace in 1775 and each year following until 1803. During the time from 1782 until 1803 he also was elected justice of the quorum. Southworth was also a member of the Connecticut General Assembly, attending sessions from October of 1769 to May of 1802. His concurrent years of service to the town and state equal 134 years.

Mr. Southworth also was involved prominently in the ecclesiastical society and school in Mansfield. He managed all his public obligations as well as had a personal life. Constant married Mary Porter in 1754 and they had seven surviving children between 1757 and 1778. Although he was not considered a wealthy man, he did manage to accumulate 142 acres of property, and he had an interest in the silk industry.

So for those folks who regularly bemoan the necessity of another meeting, the difficulty of juggling their calendar to accommodate meeting schedules and that all work seems to be focused on the same deadline – take heart. Imagine what a week must have been like for Constant Southworth!

Smith, Roberta K. The Constant Years. Mansfield, CT: Mansfield Historical Society, 1990.

BOSTON TROWTROW (n.d. - 1772)

NORWICH, CT SITE 6

Norwichtown Old Burial Ground, between Town and Elm Sts., Norwich.

Both slaves and free African-Americans in the 18th century organized themselves socially and politically under elected governors. The practice grew from traditions transplanted from African culture. Norwich was notable for having the second largest number of black residents in the Connecticut Colony, according to a 1756 census.

Boston Trowtrow was elected governor in Norwich in 1770 and served for two years. His grave marker, carved by a member of the Manning family, serves two important purposes: it is one of the few pieces of evidence that black governors were elected in Connecticut; and it is the memorial of a respected black



leader from before the Revolutionary War when most blacks were buried in poorly marked graves. His epitaph reads: "In Memory of Boston Trowtrow Governor of ye Affrican Trib he Died May 28 1772 at 66." Black residents were interred in the back portion of the Old Norwichtown Burial Ground.

Connecticut Freedom Trail

Oat, David, "Old Norwichtown Burial Ground," brochure from the Norwich Tourism Office, 1997.

ALICE RAMSDELL (c. 1910-1995)

THOMPSON, CT SITE 7

West Thompson Dam Information Kiosk, West Thompson Rd. off Rte. 12, Thompson, CT.



An active and eccentric citizen of Thompson, Alice Ramsdell lived on a farm near the banks of the Quinebaug River. The property was settled by her great-grandfather, Hezekiah Ramsdell, and she had strong feelings about her heritage. Alice was an enthusiastic and loyal member of the Thompson Historical Society and she frequently attended programs about history in other towns where she was always a supportive voice for regional heritage preservation.

Alice was a practical farmer, bringing the chickens and lambs into her house during cold weather. She milked by hand. Her father had acquired a railroad engine, boxcar, and caboose which passed to her on his death. He would never sell his collection and neither would she.

In the 1960s, after the tragic flood of 1955, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers developed several flood control sites. One was on the Quinebaug River in West Thompson. A small village was removed and the Ramsdell Homestead was the last slated for demolition. Alice met the Army Corps and their eviction notice with a shotgun. She refused to leave her home and, after some negotiation, the Army Corps agreed she could remain until her death if she paid a small land lease.

Thus by her tenacity and love for her home, Alice Ramsdell became the first person in the history of flood control in New England to take on the U.S. Army Corps and win.

This crotchety, cantankerous old woman was also the person dressed as the Easter Bunny who appeared on the town common each year to delight children.

Sally Rogers

U. S. Army Corp of Engineers. "West Thompson Lake, Resources."

<http://www.nac.usace.army.mil/recreati/wst/wstnat5.htm>

(accessed May 16, 2007).



ELMER BITGOOD (c.1870-1938)

VOLUNTOWN, CT

Elmer Bitgood has been called the “Paul Bunyan of New England” and “the local Sampson.” He was by all accounts an extraordinarily large and strong person. Paul Bitgood, one of his brothers, was a practitioner of natural healing in New London and recorded the size and habits of his sibling. In adulthood, Elmer weighed 340 pounds and stood five feet nine inches tall. He lived a simple life working on the family farm; he consumed no other drinks except milk and water, never married and was a strong and faithful Baptist. Elmer was good natured, gentle, quiet but quick to laugh. He was much loved by those in his community.

Legends of Elmer abound and seem to grow exponentially as each is repeated. However, there are a number of legitimate articles that appeared in contemporary publications that included interviews with his family and acquaintances, justifying Elmer’s amazing notoriety.

An article in the *Providence Sunday Journal* in 1916 recorded Bitgood’s feats of strength, including “lifting a 180-pound keg with both hands over the head, lifting 175 pounds of good solid Connecticut rock with one hand straight up above the head and . . . raising a dumbbell weighing 416 pounds with both hands over the head.” Elmer himself explained to the reporter how he backlifted

huge weights, adding rocks to a platform in his backyard “until the weight is 4,200 pounds. How often do I lift that? O, sometimes three or four times a day and sometimes not for a week. It all depends; if I need exercise I try it and if visitors come along and won’t believe I can do it. I just show them.” Elmer had a pet red Devon calf that he would hold on his lap and carry around on his shoulders, even when the beast was full grown.

Elmer’s uncle, Dr. Ellsworth Marshall Bitgood, a veterinarian, recounted to another Providence reporter in 1946, “how when Elmer was thirsty he would place one hand on each end of a keg of cider and drink the contents.”

Elmer lived his whole life in Voluntown, but his death is a bit of a mystery. There is no death certificate recorded in the town hall. The Robbins Cemetery holds the remains of many generations of the Bitgood family, but no marker has been found for Elmer.

American Heritage. “Bitgood Power.” http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1978/2/1978_2_108.shtml (accessed March 27, 2008).

Fair, John D. “The Search for Elmer Bitgood: The Paul Bunyan of New England.” *Journal of Physical Culture* (October, 1998): 5-17.
Erwin Goldstein



Soldiers, Statesmen & Spies ★

THOMAS L. TAYLOR (1848-1932)

PUTNAM, CT ★ SITE 8

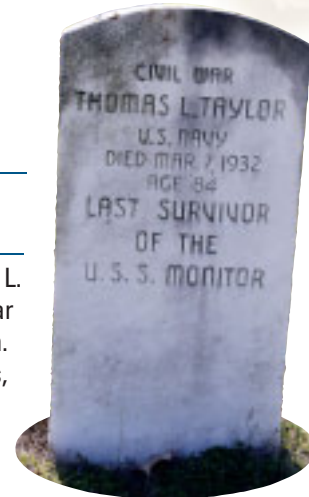
Grove Street Cemetery, Rte. 12, Putnam, CT.

Although his specific duties are not known, Thomas L. Taylor, an African-American, served in the Civil War on the *U.S.S. Monitor* at the tender age of fourteen. He participated in the notorious battle of the ironclads, the *Monitor* vs. the *Merrimac*. The battle is more correctly called the Battle of Hampton Roads and it was the first fight between two armored vessels. One was the Union’s *Monitor* and the other was the *C.S.S. Virginia*, built from the salvaged hull of the *U.S.S. Merrimac*.

The battle took place on March 8 and 9, 1862, near Sewell’s Point not far from Hampton Roads, VA. During the first day of fighting, the “*Merrimac*” pummeled the wooden Union fleet. The *Monitor* arrived the following day and a duel began between the ironclad ships. The encounter was a draw but garnered worldwide publicity.

When Taylor died at the age of 84, he was the last survivor of the great battle. His grave in the Grove Street Cemetery in Putnam, CT, is marked by a simple rectangular marble stone.

Connecticut Freedom Trail



BENEDICT ARNOLD (1741-1801)

NORWICH, CT ★ SITE 9

His birthplace is in private ownership but his mother and siblings are interred in the Old Norwichtown Burial Ground, between Town and Elm Sts., Norwich, CT.

Benedict Arnold – famous or infamous? The Arnolds were an affluent family in Norwich that suffered a reversal of fortunes precipitating Benedict’s removal from school before graduation. His passion to regain financial security and position coupled with

