

The Groton Historical Society

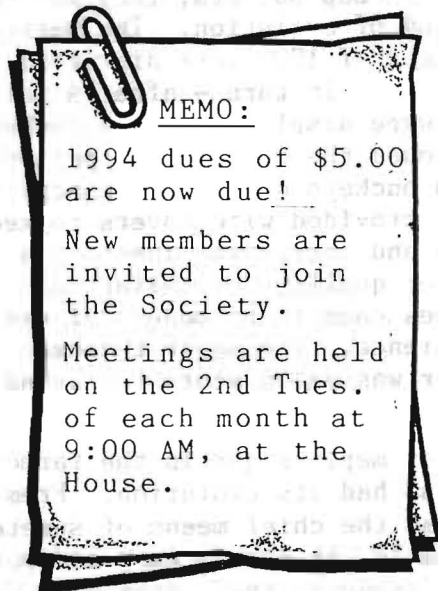


NEWSLETTER

GROTON, VERMONT

WINTER 1993-1994

NO. 19



MEMO:

1994 dues of \$5.00 are now due!

New members are invited to join the Society.

Meetings are held on the 2nd Tues. of each month at 9:00 AM, at the House.



The Annual Christmas Open House at the Historic House was held on Sunday, December 12, 1993. The House was decorated for the Christmas season and the many visitors who attended were entertained by a concert of organ music by Bruce Stevens, who played the recently restored old pump organ which was donated to the Groton Historical Society by Mr. & Mrs. Rufus Hosmer.

After the concert the guests joined in the singing of Christmas Carols. Refreshments were served after the program

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VERMONT RAILROADS

Almost as impressive as the fiery locomotives are the brave men who pilot them. Selected from a group with high moral character and the utmost resolve, the position of railroad conductor is fast becoming one of the state's most challenging and indispensable vocations.

Witness the case of one lad employed with the Vermont Central Railroad who applied for reinstatement after being discharged for irresponsible operation.

"You were dismissed," said the superintendent austerely, "for letting your train come twice into collision."

"The very same reason why I ask to be restored, if I had any doubt before as to whether two trains can pass on one track, I am now satisfied, having tried it twice that it can't be done, and I am not likely to try it again." The lad was summarily restored to his position.

(From Bicentennial Vermonter)



(Excerpts from Mr. Glover's Groton)

SUGARING

At first the making of maple sugar in March and April was one of the most important industries on every farm. To the pioneer this commodity was not only an essential for the family larder but a steady means of barter at the nearest store. Most families depended on maple sugar for all their sweetening. Although cane sugar in time displaced maple in most cooking recipes there has always been a specialized market for this local product.

To the pioneer just beginning his clearing in the deep woods, the essential equipment for making sugar was a clump of rock maples, with some fir trees near at hand, an iron kettle, an ax, an adze, a tapping iron with a curved cutting edge like a gouge, two wooden pail and a sap-yoke. The pioneer was obliged to go into his virgin forest, cut down some fir trees, and with ax and adze hollow out the required number of sap troughs - two to three feet in length - needed to catch the sap. Then he would make a large trough to serve as a storage tank.

With the approach of a likely sap day (frost overnight, with a warming morning sun) the sugar maker would cut a gash in each tree. Then with a tapping iron he would make an incision just below the gash and drive into it a wooden spout shaped to fit the incision. The sap would then trickle down to the spout and drip into the trough on the ground below. For boiling the sap the iron kettle was hung on a stout pole supported at each end by a crotched post well anchored in the ground. With proper fuel beneath a fire was started and the boiling began. All this was performed under the open sky unless the worker had made a rude shelter of poles roofed with evergreen boughs. To say the least, this was "sugaring" under difficulties.

With industry, courage, and hard work, however, conditions changed for the better. One day a sugar house was finished and the old kettle

taken inside and encased in a fire arch of brick or stone. The sap troughs were cast aside for the cedar buckets made in leisure hours in winter. The trees, no longer wastefully gashed, were pierced with a pod augur or bit which made a wound more quickly healed. Trudging long distances through snow, with two large pails of sap balanced on a neck yoke, gave way to the "drawing" tub mounted on a pung and hauled by oxen.

But it was a long time before the sugar-making came into possession of the typical sugaring outfit of 1900. The shallow sheet-iron pan for more rapid evaporation had displaced the old cauldron kettle; galvanized iron had replaced the plain sheet iron. Finally in the eighties and nineties the evaporator displaced all previous means of reducing sap to syrup, and was used by all farmers who produced any sizable amount of sugar. As to sap buckets, they too had their period of evolution. The narrow-top cedar buckets of 1800 were discarded for the open top, which in turn - after a half a century - were displaced by tin buckets. Finally around the end of this period galvanized iron buckets came into general use. These were provided with covers to keep out rain, snow and dirt, thus insuring a product of finer quality and saving much fuel. Sugar houses came to be models of neatness and convenience. The do-it-the-hard-way of the pioneer was now a story for grandfather to tell.

The place of maple sugar in the farmer's economy also had its evolution. From its early use as the chief means of sweetening for the family, it became more and more a commercial product, the source of a sure if modest income. Although soon displaced by cane and beet products for general use, it increasingly found a special market.

Not until the last two decades of the 19th century was maple syrup made to any extent for the market, and not until the turn of the century did it become, as now, the almost universal product.

AS the years rolled on, fewer farmers made sugar, partly because many of the early sugar orchards had been lumbered to supply the need for ready cash. But if there were fewer sugar orchards tapped, there was more sugar made considering the number of trees tapped, and of better quality, due to the improved methods of manufacture.

VERMONT

Lincoln pardon was staged, book alleges

By John Milne
GLOBE STAFF

GROTON, Vt. — One great legend of the Civil War is that President Abraham Lincoln saved from a firing squad a young Vermont soldier who had fallen asleep while on guard duty.

Over the years the story has been told and re-told as evidence of Lincoln's humanity and compassion.

But now, several century-old letters unearthed in Vermont state archives indicate that the 1861 incident was staged, with Lincoln's knowledge, according to a

new book. If the same thing happened today, it might well be labeled a publicity seeking media event.

The April 22, 1892, a letter of Brig. Gen. William Farrar Smith, kept in the Vermont Historical Archives in Montpelier, was reproduced in "Full Duty," a book published Friday by Howard Coffin.

Clifton Fadiman, the longtime editor and literary figure, wrote in 1960 that the story of the sleeping sentinel, William Scott, illustrates Lincoln's greatness. "I seem to have known all my life that Abraham Lincoln once saved from the death penalty a young Union sentinel who had fallen asleep at his post. It is part of the

Lincoln legend we all grew up with," he wrote.

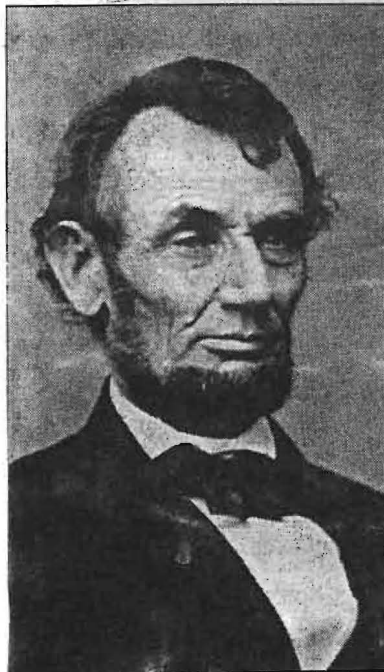
But Gen. "Baldy" Smith, who commanded the Vermont volunteers in 1861, wrote in the 1892 letter to a New York lawyer friend: "There was no intention of having Scott shot."

In September 1861, shortly after Union troops lost the battle of Bull Run and officials feared Washington would be invaded, the Vermont regiment was guarding Chain Bridge, a vital Potomac River crossing close to the capital.

The army was worried about "raw LINCOLN, Page 42

'Mr. Lincoln will go down in history with enough great qualities without a lot of clap trap reputation fastened upon him by people who write sensational history.'

GEN. WILLIAM FARRAR SMITH
In an 1892 letter



ABRAHAM LINCOLN

■ LINCOLN

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troops" because, Smith wrote, they "did not at all appreciate the vital importance of wakefulness on the part of men on picket duty." A plan was developed to teach them a lesson. "I was to get a good case and bring it before a court-martial. The judge advocate was to press for the extreme penalty of the law and the sentence approved by the general commanding was to go to the president with a recommendation for pardon."

Scott's case, Smith wrote in a letter to another friend, filled the bill.

A daguerreotype picture of Scott, then 22, survives, big-boned and bearded. Scott, Coffin wrote, could never get in step, stepping on the heels of soldiers during marches.

On Aug. 31, 1860, Scott, was one

of three guards. At 4 a.m. an officer found Scott sleeping. He was court-martialed. His death warrant is now in the Fairbanks Museum in St. Johnsbury.

Case caused furor

The case caused a furor in the newspapers at the time and several witnesses, including many Vermonters, pleaded with Lincoln for a pardon.

On Sept. 9 a punishment detail was ordered and the regiment lined up in a big triangle. Six men were in the firing squad. Each had a musket. Three were loaded. Scott stood trembling before them, a white cap pulled down over his face.

But instead of reading an execution order, the officer in charge declared: "The President of the United States has expressed a wish that, as this is the first condemnation to

death in this army for this crime, mercy may be extended to the criminal." The regiment broke into cheers.

Wrote Smith: "The understanding was carried out to the letter."

Two other letters in the archives, by a Wheelock Veazey, confirm Smith's version, said Coffin, press secretary for Sen. James M. Jeffords (R-Vt). No one has studied them before, Coffin says, because "I don't think anyone knows they're here."

Coffin is a member of the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission, a federal panel trying to preserve from development the nation's Civil War battlefields.

Vermont war role praised

"Vermont's real contribution to American history was in the Civil War, but nobody knows about it," Coffin said, pointing out that Ver-

mont sent 34,238 men to war between 1861 and 1865 — more than 10 percent of the state's population of 315,098. A total of 5,224 Vermonters — 15 percent of those who went to war — were killed. On a per capita basis, Coffin believes, "Vermont ranks first in the number of men killed in combat."

But back to the letters about Lincoln and the sleeping sentry. Do they change the 16th president's legend?

Coffin says they give additional insight into Lincoln as a leader who was both compassionate and wanted to remind his troops of the necessity for being alert on guard duty.

And Smith's own letter says: "Mr. Lincoln will go down in history with enough great qualities without a lot of clap trap reputation fastened upon him by people who write sensational history."

