



The Thompson Historical Society Newsletter



Spring 2018

PO Box 47, Thompson CT 06277

www.thompsonhistorical.com

Ellen Larned Memorial Building Roof Restoration Update

BY: Joe Lindley



For the past 300 years, citizens of Thompson, Connecticut have demonstrated an extraordinary sense of benevolence when major challenges developed in our community. Stories of Thompsonites banding together during times of war, natural disasters or the need for community action, are well documented and described. A good example of this was the construction of the first Thompson Public Library, now called the Ellen Larned Memorial Building (ELM). The new library was the result of the extraordinary efforts of famed historian, Ellen Larned (1825-1912). Ellen recognized the need for a proper library in Thompson and gathered many prominent citizens and volunteers to make the dream a reality. The story of how the project came together is one for the ages.

(For more information about the ELM and its early years please see *Echoes of Thompson* or *Thompson Public Library; Celebrating 100 years 1902-2002*. Both books can be found at the Thompson Historical Society or the Thompson Public Library).

On November 16, 2017, ownership of the ELM was officially transferred from the Town of Thompson to the Thompson Historical Society (THS). The Society's desire to purchase the building and become its new stewards did not come lightly and required many hours of discussion and debate. The Town of Thompson, former owners of the ELM, experienced several unsuccessful attempts to raise or allocate the funds necessary to repair the ELM's badly damaged roof, so Society members felt that purchasing the property was the only way it could protect the historical nature of the building.

(See ELM Page 2)

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****ANNUAL MEETING**** **June 12, 2018**

The Annual Meeting will be held at the home of Rob and Sue Vincent on Route 21, Thompson. (Greystone Farm)

Picnic will start at 6 p.m.
Meeting will Start at 7 p.m.

Please RSVP Sue Vincent at 860-923-5728 and to volunteer a side dish.

Thank you once again for the generosity of the Vincents for hosting our Annual Meeting!



Thompson's Vonsiastsky Responsible for One of America's Most Notable WWII War Heroes

ANDY MAMEDOFF ONE OF THE "FEW"

BY: JOSEPH LINDLEY

THOMPSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Reprint from an article in the Thompson Villager

I greatly enjoyed Nancy Weiss' Villager article dated Friday, January 15, 2016 titled *The Real Life Story of 'Count' Vonsiastsky*. Count Anastase Vonsiastsky was everything Ms. Weiss stated in her article, and more. I also recommend the book, *Russian Fascist, Tragedy and Farce in Exile, 1925-1945*, by John Stephen. Few who understand the Count's unusual story would dispute the position he holds as one of Thompson, Connecticut's most colorful characters. (See Vonsiastsky Page 2)

(ELM Cont'd)

Once the deed was signed, the THS Restoration Committee comprised of Joseph Iamartino, John Rice, Sue Vincent, Mark Snay and Joseph Lindley, began the challenging task of raising the necessary funds (\$125,000) to restore the Spanish-styled roof. The first order of business was to apply to the Connecticut State Department of Economic Development's Historic Preservation Office for a \$50,000 restoration grant, the most amount offered by the state. The grant-request process required the THS to submit a 100-plus page application to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). On January 31, 2018, after weeks of nail-biting anticipation, Commissioner Catherine Smith, CT Department of Economic Development, signed the grant request, awarding the THS \$50,000. While outstanding news, it meant the THS had to raise the balance of \$75,000 dollars needed.

The "Save the ELM Campaign" was kicked off with great energy in December 2017. Personal business and home mailings, WINY radio show appearances, newspaper articles, ads and "good-ole" door knocking commenced in earnest. Since the start of the campaign, that 300 years of "extraordinary sense of benevolence," has once again flourished. With donations big and small, the Society, as of May 20, 2018, has raised \$43,178 on its own, bringing our total to \$93,178! This equates to 74% of the overall funds needed.

As part of the next phase, request for quotation specifications were developed and the Society sent the RFQs out by the end of March. The overall goal is to have the roof repaired by the end of Fall-2018. According to the Restoration Committee, this is the extremely aggressive timeline, but one to which they are committed.

While the project is off to a great start, we still have much work ahead of us and we need your help. We still have to raise more than \$30,000 to reach our goal! The roof project has started, so watch for updates. And remember, any amount, no matter how small, is helpful! If you wish to make a tax-deductible donation, please send your check to:

**Thompson Historical Society
PO Box 47
Thompson, CT 06277**

11 June 1921 - Putnam News

The body of Oscar W. Swanson of North Grosvenordale, who was killed on a French battlefield, is expected to reach this country this month. Algot Swanson, the boy's father, requested the return of the body to this country. The North Grosvenordale post of the American Legion, which is named after the young soldier, will arrange for a military funeral.

(Vonsiastsky Cont'd)

There is another element, however, to the Count's many antics that requires further discussion. As Ms. Weiss noted, the Count married Marion Ream, daughter to the financial giant Norman Ream and they established their new home in Thompson, Connecticut, not far from her father Norman's estate (now Marianapolis Prep.). Once settled, the Count sent for his sister Natasha and her husband Lev Mamedoff, now living in Europe. Legend had it that Lev, a former police official, was being hunted by Joseph Stalin's secret police for once arresting Stalin, an offense punishable by the torture and death of his entire family. Natasha and Lev came to America with their son Andrew, who by all accounts, had a wild streak. He drove fast cars, attended Tourtellotte Memorial High School (c.1928-1929), and hung around with a troublesome crowd of teenagers who liked to cause mischief. He was expelled from TMHS several times for "conduct unbecoming a scholar" and eventually was sent to a boarding school to complete his studies. He then attended Bryant College, located in Smithfield, Rhode Island, and was trying to piece together a more productive life when the flying bug bit him, and bit him hard. Within a few short months, Andy found something in life he was very good at and greatly enjoyed – Flying airplanes.



Above: Andy and the 71st RAF Squadron, the first all-American Royal Air Force fighter squadron. Andy is 5th from the left. Imperial War Museum photo.

During the first few years of WWII, America chose neutrality. The Nazis marched unabated across Europe, toppling country after country. Some Americans with relatives living in Europe became frustrated with the U.S.'s lack of involvement and decided to take matters into their own hands by joining the militaries of foreign governments, something strictly prohibited by U.S. law. In 1940, Mamedoff, then a flying barnstormer, and several other U.S. pilots decided to join the French Armee de l'Air, and like many American pilots during WWI, fight the Germans in the sky.

He arrived in France just as the Nazis were completing their conquest of that country. He escaped on one of the last ships out of France, arriving in Britain where he and several other Americans joined

(See Vonsiastsky Page 3)

(Vonsiastsky Cont'd)

the Royal Air Force. They eventually became known as Eagle Squadron, a hard-fighting American fighter group credited with many Luftwaffe kills. Mamedoff quickly became one of the most proficient fighter pilots in the RAF and was awarded for his skills by becoming the first American to be appointed an RAF flight leader. In 1940, during the Battle of Britain, Eagle Squadron became a key element in successfully driving away the Luftwaffe from British skies. With no reserves available, the RAF somehow managed to survive the repeated attacks and beat back the tenacious Luftwaffe. Had these brave RAF pilots failed at their work, the world, and the war, would have turned out very differently.

After the battle, on August 20, 1940, Winston Churchill addressed the British people and gave his now famous speech, "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." Andy Mamedoff, nephew of Count Vonsiastsky, former student at Tourtellotte Memorial High School, and world-class fighter pilot was one of the "Few." Andy was killed on October 8, 1941, doing what he loved most – Flying.

For more information on Thompson's Andy Mamedoff and the other Americans who flew in the RAF during WWII, I would highly recommend *The Few*, by New York Times bestselling author, Alex Kershaw.

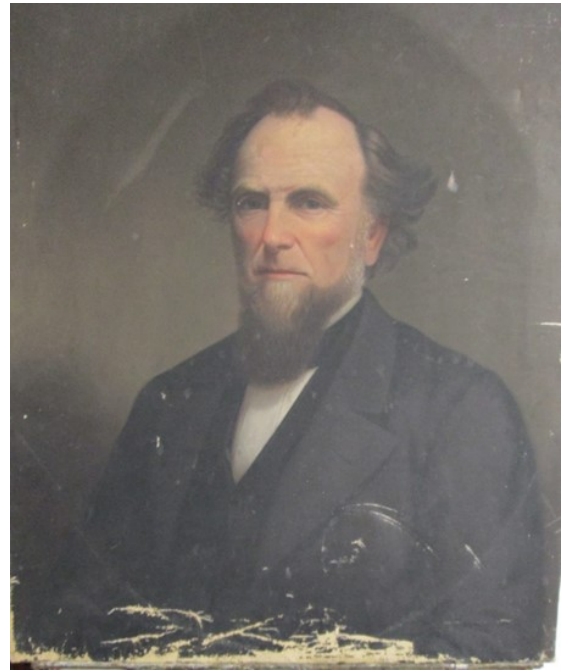
The Mystery of the Converse Painting

BY: Joe Lindley

Recently, the Thompson Historical Society sent one of its oldest paintings out for some badly needed restoration. Tucked away safely in the archive files for years was a severely damaged 1800s painting of one of the original Thompson Library's benefactors, Mr. Converse.

Upon further researching Mr. Converse, a mystery developed. The Thompson Historical Society researchers are not certain which Mr. Converse he is! Several sources note that Elisha Converse was the largest donor of the project. For nearly 100 years, many library and Historical Society members thought the painting hanging in the 1902 Thompson Library, located at Thompson Common, was of him. New information has recently surfaced that questions this. The wife of Abiel Converse also donated funds for the new 1902 Library. Mr. and Mrs. Abiel Converse did not have any children, so it is entirely possible the painting could be of Abiel and found a home at the 1902 Library after his passing. Research at the THS continues.

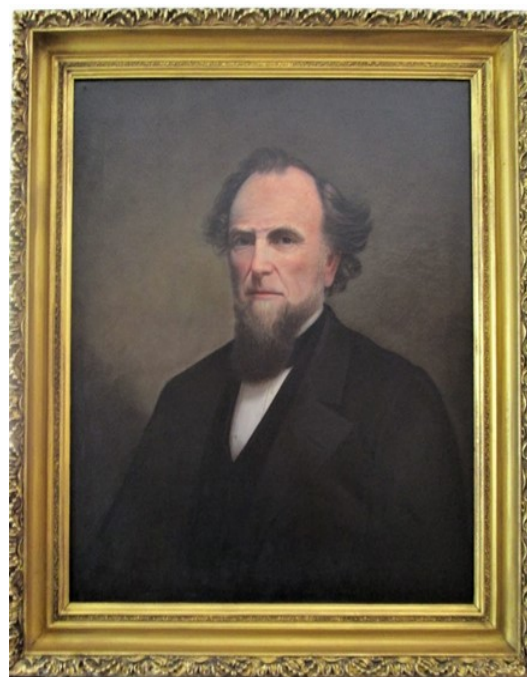
The damaged painting (shown) was sent to fine art and frame restorer, Roy Collins of Vagabond Portfolios, Chepachet, RI. Collins has been instrumental in the art restoration effort for both the Thompson Historical Society and the Tourtellotte Memorial Room/Museum, located in North Grosvenordale, CT. To date, Collins has repaired and restored nearly 80 pieces for both organizations.



Above: Before - The damage to the painting included lost paint, mold, tears, scratches, etc.

After cleaning and examining the Converse painting, Collins found no signature which would allow us to easily identify the artist. Being familiar with the style, he felt the painter was most likely Horace Robbins Burdick. Burdick was born in East Killingly, Connecticut in 1844 and had ties to Thompson, CT as a young man. He attended the Union Hall School in Providence, The Lowell Institute in Boston, and the Museum School of Fine Arts, Boston. He finally settled in Malden, Massachusetts in 1886.

The restored painting, will hang in the Ellen Larned Building next to a painting depicting a younger version of the same man.



Left-After repairing the painting, Collins mounted the painting on an age appropriate frame. The painting will be shown for the first time in decades at the Annual Thompson Historical Society Meeting held June 12, 2018 and then hang at the ELM.

From The President's Quill - By: Joseph Iamartino



Metaphors are history defined and can be very local in origin. 'Swamp Yankee' is one good example that is well suited to Thompson's history. Another metaphor specific to Thompson are the walls of Ellen Larned's library.

Ellen Larned's wish that the town's library become a repository and sharing center of knowledge and history is well documented in her speech given at the opening of the library building in 1902. Though she inspired the students to bring stones from their homes for the library's exterior walls, that contribution to the wonderful building was but a metaphor for her dream.

When a person talks too much (like me!) and others wish for less words, or the father who looks at a son or daughter who isn't putting in the right effort on homework, the hope is always for the 'right' or appropriate amount. What is the wish of the leader of a historical society or a builder of a library? That people spend all day and night with a book in their hands, ignoring life and reality? No, the wish is only that our fellow neighbors appreciate and contemplate what acquired knowledge and history can bring to themselves and a community. Educators know that people learn in different ways. Some learn by reading. Others by building. Some must watch others and imitate while a few must learn and fail repeatedly with their own experiments. Learning to ride a bike is a good metaphor for this last style of education. How does one learn to become a good citizen of a town?

There is no one good definition. Metaphors are good for these situations. Ellen's stones of different sizes and shapes in the mason's hands yielded a sturdy wall. She demonstrated that a community can rally around a cause supporting knowledge and history. She was present at the 1907 laying of the cornerstone of the walls of the Tourtellotte Memorial High School and the 1902 library building, but her words then were a metaphor for us. Both the school and the library were given free of cost to Thompson. Those donors, fellow citizens, wanted to inspire the town to do the right amount of homework. Remember that the town at that point had no high school and no library.

Her message to the resident Swamp Yankees, farmers, rich town merchants and penniless immigrant mill workers then was a metaphor. Was she saying 'Come together and let's educate our community. Work together to build this building and inspire in the future others to work together for the next project?' Or, was she simply placing a stone in a wall?

Pictures from the Past



Norman Babbitt (1929-2017) Veteran, Teacher, Patriot

With Memorial Day upon us, it is fitting that we recognize Norm Babbitt, a former THS member, a combat veteran, and a teacher. Norm proudly served in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, fighting in four major battles. During his time in combat, he earned numerous awards and citations. But it's not his distinguished service for which he is most known. After the war, during his later years, Norm became a dedicated teacher to the children of Thompson, especially during Memorial Day and Veterans' Day. For years, Norm organized events at the Thompson Public Schools that helped the students understand the importance of honoring our fallen warriors and those who served. Norm passed away in January of 2017, but his work has been carried on by members of the American Legion Post 67 and VFW Post 10088.



Putnam Patriot, Putnam, CT - 15 July 1887

West Thompson - A slight fire in Mr. Hickles bakery caused a ripple of excitement on Tuesday, but the flames were soon extinguished and no serious loss sustained.

Putnam Patriot, Putnam, CT - 17 June 1887

North Grosvenordale - Dr. L. P. Causey, who sold out his practice in this place recently, has removed to Salisbury, Mass.

Items You May Not Have Known

With Memorial Day upon us, we should never forget those who sacrificed everything in service to their country. Thompson's war death numbers are:

1. Revolutionary War – 6
2. War of 1812 – 1
3. Civil War – 35
4. WWI – 5
5. WWII – 26
6. Korean War – 2
7. Vietnam War—4

Ask the Oracle

(Questions from our members and friends)

Q. With all the activity concerning the recent investigations of Native Americans in Thompson, CT, one of our members asked, "Who was the first white person to visit Thompson?"

A. Most scholars agree that John Eliot or Daniel Gookin, during the quest to establish "Praying Towns" in Nipmuck country, were among the first Englishmen to visit what is now Thompson, CT. According to Connole, in his book, *The Indians of the Nipmuck Country in Southern New England, 1630-1675*, the first praying town in our area was established at Maanexit (Fabyan) and later Quantisset (Thompson Hill) and date back to the late 1650s or 1660. Records dating to that time make it difficult to determine the exact date. What is remarkable is it took the English nearly 40 years after establishing Plymouth Plantation to reach Thompson, a distance of only 80 miles.

Do You Have a Question?

Contact us at Facebook or send us an Email

Who Lurks the ELM?

The Ellen Larned Memorial Building was recently visited by People Versus Paranormal Investigators, a New England based supernatural research group. Lauren Middleton, a PVP researcher and former Thompsonite, contacted the THS several months ago to see if the THS would allow a paranormal study. Over the years, the ELM has experienced tilted paintings, moved items, and other odd strange occurrences that could not be explained, so the executive staff agreed.

PVP used high-tech equipment such as digital recorders, thermal imaging, and static proximity sensors to determine if the ELM has supernatural residents or visitors. The investigation took a number of hours starting before dawn and continuing into the night. Recordings and film were secured and brought back to the PVP lab for evaluation.

We are not certain what Ellen Larned would have thought of the study, but it is certain we would be pleased to find that she still walks the old library! More to follow!



Left to right: Tim Aldrich - PVP, Lauren Middleton - PVP, Lisa Berg - THS member, Anthony Mazur - PVP, Darlene Snay – THS member, and Ben Ring – PVP. THS Photo.

Members who love to shop on line could help us raise money for the roof repair and maintenance of our two historical buildings by using **AMAZON SMILE**. It is the same as your Amazon account but donates .05% of your purchases to the Thompson Historical Society when you designate us as your choice. There is no cost. If you have questions about joining call Sue Vincent 860-923-5728. Thank you.

Putnam Patriot, Putnam, CT - 27 May 1887 Wilsonville Column

This pretty place, situated half way between North Grosvenordale and Webster, is a thriving place. There is one woolen mill which is capable of employing sixty work people when full, and that is about all the business except what the store does. The water privilege is good and the property a fine one, although the mill is old and needs a great deal of renovation. The present owner Mr. L. Keegan, is getting in new machinery and arranging to change the character of his manufactures, in order to secure a more staple market.

An ingenious fellow named Christopher Green, a weaver in the mill, has constructed a remarkable boat. It is put together entirely with screws, of which he used 45 dozen in its completion. It is a design of his own, and plys about the large pond, a thing of delight to many of the young people of both sexes. He has thus furnished them with a very pleasant diversion.

Membership Information:

- \$10.00 Individual Membership
- \$15.00 Family Membership
- \$25.00 Contributing Membership
- \$5.00 Student Membership

Memberships are due by July 1 of each calendar year

Make checks payable to:

Thompson Historical Society
Po Box 47
Thompson, CT 06277

Anyone interested in joining the Thompson Historical Society can contact us at:

Phone Number: 860-928-5527

Web Site: www.thompsonhistorical.org



Schedule of Events:

June 12 - Annual Meeting -
 Greystone Farm, 7:00 pm, Picnic
 6:00 pm

October 10 - East Thompson wreck
 walk by Ray Axelrod - original wreck
 site 1:00 pm

October 10 - Wreck talk at
 Southbridge Historical Society by Joe
 Iamartino and John Moore - 7:00
 pm

October 13 - Railroad Day in
 Thompson - Ryscavage Auditorium,
 See the Ramsdell collection, hear
 presentations about rail history
 (Agenda to be released in July)

All dates and times are tentative with
 the exception of the annual meeting.

Officers and Contact Information:

Joseph Iamartino - President
 Joseph Lindley - Vice President
 Sue Vincent - Treasurer
 Mark Snay - Secretary, Senior Archivist
 John Rice - Building Committee Chair
 Abe Gustavson - Director
 Ginny Flood - Director
 Burt Rhodes - Director
 Lucille Barrette - Director
 Dr. Chris Wagner - Director
 Paul Hughes - Director
 Kathy Welch - Director
 Kathleen Herbert - Director
 Joh Brynga - Director
 Roberta Baublitz - Director
 Lisa Berg - Director

Ellen Larned Memorial Building THS Museum

339 Thompson Road
 Thompson, CT 06277
 (Opened Sundays 9:00 am to noon May to
 October or by appointment)

Old Thompson Town Hall

1 Chase Road
 Thompson, CT 06277
 (Open by appointment)

Tourtellotte Memorial Room

785 Riverside Drive
 North Grosvenordale, CT 06255
 (Open by appointment)

Thompson Historical Society

PO Box 47
 Thompson, CT 06277



Preserving Thompson, Connecticut's History Since 1968