

Johnston Historical Society

HISTORICAL NOTES

Vol. III #3 January, 1987

Cathy Lobello, president

Louis H. McGowan, editor

Robert S. Burford, assist.

UPON JOHNSTON'S HILLS - At Hughesdale, Morgan Mill and Simmonsville

(The following reprint is the first part of an article that was printed in the Providence Journal on July 27, 1890. We will carry the rest of the article in future newsletters. It should be remembered that this is a journalist's account of his visit to these sights. His observations are, of course, invaluable, but all the historical points should not be taken as facts without checking).

A strange characteristic of human nature is the desire to get away from home and its surroundings, to find places new, varied and beautiful. Some distant mountains, some lonely valley, any quiet nook where God has lent to nature its most pleasing charms is eagerly sought after by the summer tourist. The resorts along the shore and in the country towns of Rhode Island are often better appreciated by strangers than by the unfortunate natives, who having eyes see not. The beauties of the scenery in the confines of Columbia's smallest State are many and wonderful. From the wave-washed sands of the seacoast towns to the wooded hills on the northern border, Rhode Island is a succession of little valleys, plains and heights, a charming landscape, intersected by peaceful rivers which are ever widening into ponds, fed by gurgling brooks flowing over stony bottoms and through marshy pastures till they all meet in the great ocean.

Outside the crowded streets of Providence, going westward, up Plainfield street, one suddenly comes upon a romantic looking eminence from whence, on a clear day, a view may be obtained of Fall River and the resorts along Narragansett Bay. The city church spires towering about the masses of wooden architecture can be counted, and the hands on the clocks, as they glisten in the afternoon sun, tell the time of day. This storied spot is known in records official as Neutaconkanut Hill. At the foot of the eastern slope is King's pond and Smith's Nursery, and just across the Plainfield pike is Silver Lake, and the level tract known as the Plain Farm District. A short drive up the old Killingly road brings one to the Central pike, or as it is known to the student of the atlas, New pike. It starts near William Smith's house and climbs the northwestern brow of the

hill. On the right is the old orchard where the gypsies used to make their annual camping ground. When the summit is reached the road leads through a flourishing community of farmers, market gardeners and milkmen. There are some new cottages and many well-kept farm houses. These primitive acres are dotted by herds of cattle in their respective pastures browsing lazily in the sunshine or standing in the cooling shade of a spreading tree. Running brooks supply the water for these animals. A little bridge over the roadway here and there leaves the channel free for the murmuring streamlet. Lines of wires on both sides of the road are covered by flocks of little white-breasted swallows, which lie hither and thither ever changing their position. Then the way leads down into a valley and Morgan mill chimney can be seen across the fields to the south. In this valley the Pocasset river, which rises in the Winsor district north of Hartford pike, flows peacefully



onward to the Pawtuxet. As the steed mounts the upward grade a cross-road extends from north to south connecting the Hartford pike with the Central and that with the Free pike at Morgan mill. The church and schoolhouse are passed and there comes to view the residence of Theodore H. Hughes on the right, situated on a high bank sustained by 200 feet or more of massive stone wall. On the opposite side of the thoroughfare is an acre and a half of buildings nearly all one-story structures used as chemical works. This is Hughesdale. In 1850 Thomas H. Hughes came here and settled and built a little dye house. He began the chemical business, building a new structure every now and then. In May, 1868, some 22 years ago, the dams on the Dry Brook stream gave way one morning, and the print works, a yarn mill and Hughes' chemical works were all washed away, and Morgan mill as well. There were three water

(continued pg. 10)

privileges which were subservient to the uses of these works. They were the Oak Swamp reservoir on Hartford pike, the dam at the ice house and that at the works. The ruins of the print works may still be seen, where Carter's and Hohler's ice house now stands. Next was the yarn mill, and then the chemical works. The two upper buildings were swept entirely away, and even the bed for the engine at the chemical works was



carried off. The trouble was caused by the putting on of extra boards at the dam. The water thus kept back forced its way out to one side and washed a gully, so that in a little while the dam gave out and the work of destruction began. The watchman discovered it early in the morning, but it was too late to remedy the evil. Fortunately, no lives were lost at this time, but a valuable lot of property was swept down through Dry brook and the valley of the Pocasset.

Mr. Hughes rebuilt his works a little at a time. Owing to the nature of the material used in the business the work has to be done on the ground floor and this accounts for the long, low one-story buildings on the edge of Dry brook, a name which in itself is a misnomer. It is a stream which is never dry. Mr. Hughes built 16 tenement houses in the vicinity of his works. To-day going west the first building reached is the two-story structure which faces the road on the left. A long, low wooden piazza, with a horse chestnut tree growing through its top, is surmounted by a sign which tells the passer by that it is or was the Hughesdale Post Office and store. Just at present there is no store kept here. The pressure of other business has kept the proprietor so busy that he has not had time to attend to this department. The land falls abruptly at this point and the lower story of the building rests on an entirely different level. Another building is passed and then a broad driveway admits the loaded teams to the lower story of the building in the valley by the brook. In November, 1889, the property was purchased at auction by Theodore H. Hughes, a son of the founder of the works. He is the village Postmaster as well as the manager of the industry located here. About 18 men are usually employed in the business. It is all heavy work and there is nothing connected with it suitable for women or children to perform. It is possible with this force of workmen to get out 15 or 20 tons of heavy chemicals every day. Among the special

products of the establishment are silicate of soda, arsenic (of) soda, stannic soda, Glauber's salt (so called from its discoverer, Glauber, a German chemist and physician, who died in 1668), tin crystals, sulphate of soda and several other chemical substances. The introduction of the aniline colors a few years since had a deleterious effect upon the manufacture of chemical compounds. Because of this fact Mr. Hughes last November added to his business the making of soaps for fulling mills, scouring soap, printer's soap, red oil soap and similar productions. This new business requires some upper rooms for dyeing purposes, and one of the old buildings is now roofless waiting for the addition of a second story. The business is at present the most profitable it has been for years, and the future looks bright for the new industry in its union with the old. Recently the inside of the flume has been relined and tarred. An old iron kettle with its three legs pointing skyward shows where the tar was boiled. Back of the flume is a little sheet of water bordered with trees and bushes to its very edge. These trees form a sort of letter V, and it makes a very pretty picture which is lost to the traveller on the highway. Then there is another great building resting down at the foot of the bank, its eaves touching the roadside. Beside this is the tall brick chimney with the date 1867 set in its side to tell the inquirer when it was built. Last July about 12 feet of the top fell and a mass of rubbish shows where it landed. Six feet were replaced, but it has not reached its pristine height. The ordinary price for carting material for the works is 75 cents a ton, but the proprietor keeps his own teams for that purpose. For 55 cents a ton stone can be carted from this region for the crusher.

(to be continued in future issues)

The Johnston Historical Society is a non-profit group devoted to preserving in all forms the history of the town. We are interested in the preservation of the written word, photographs and other graphic artifacts, and historical buildings and sites. Our membership, which is open to all adults, costs \$5 for an individual per year and \$7 for a family. Payment of dues is expected by October 31st of each year. Our historical newsletter, which is printed every other month, is mailed to all active members. The general meeting is held monthly throughout the year at 7:30 p.m. on the fourth Monday of every month at the Farmum/Angell House, 101 Putnam Pike.

HISTORICAL TEASERS

Answers to last month's questions:

- 1) Today Merino village is part of Providence proper. It is centered on Ponagansett Avenue near the Woonasquatucket River in Olneyville. Until 1898 the village was part of Johnston. The name Merino comes from Merino sheep which produce a finer wool than common domestic sheep. Merino wool became very popular around 1810 and this led John Waterman to found the Merino Mills in 1812 to manufacture Merino cloth. His original mill burned in 1841 and was rebuilt in 1851. This mill remains and still is called Merino Mill.
- 2) There were five separate rail lines that ran through or into Johnston. Four of the runs were trolley lines and one was a railroad line. The railroad line was operated by the Providence and Springfield R.R. (later the New York & New England and later the New York, New Haven, & Hartford Railroads) and its track followed the course of the Woonasquatucket River from Olneyville to Graniteville while in Johnston. The four trolley lines were: two lines run by the Providence & Danielson Railway, one running across the town along the length of Hartford Avenue, and the other following Route 44 through Graniteville (as part of its route from Providence to Chepachet); a third trolley line was operated from Providence to Olneyville and then up Plainfield Street to Thornton where it turned north on Atwood Avenue and stopped at Hughesdale (this line was run by the Union Railroad Co.- later the Rhode Island Co.); the fourth line, also run by the Union Railroad Co., ran out Manton Avenue from Providence, crossing the town line at the Woonasquatucket River and continuing up Greenville Avenue to its terminus at the beginning of George Waterman Road.
- 3) Balanced Rock or Football Rock once stood on the southern slope of Neutaconkanut Hill in back of a house at 991 Plainfield Street in Johnston. The huge boulder, about 20 feet high and 17 feet in diameter, was deposited there by a retreating glacier. It was noted in Charles T. Jackson's Geology of Rhode Island written in 1840. In the 19th century, according to a 1954 Providence Journal article, it was known as Football Rock to the younger generation and Balanced Rock to the older folk. The rock, which lasted many thousands of years through all kinds of calamities, was finally blasted apart by a local construction company in September, 1954. Local residents had been worried that Hurricane Carol had destroyed too much of the rock's underpinning when it tore through Rhode Island in August, 1954.

This month's questions:

- 1) In 1824 an important Revolutionary War hero passed through Johnston having breakfast at a Johnston house along the way. Who was that hero and where did he have breakfast?
- 2) Where did the name Morgan Mills come from?
- 3) In the past 100 years how many buildings were used to house the Johnston Town Hall?



During November society members Pat Macari, Louis Ullucci, and Louis, Judy, Mike, & Jenny McGowan went on a field trip to a "lost" village in the neighboring town of Smithfield.

HANTON CITY

FOR THE SECOND TIME IN MY LIFE, NOT SO LONG AGO, I HEARD ABOUT A LONG LOST PLACE CALLED HANTON CITY. EVEN THE OLD ONE LANE GRAVEL AND STONEY PATH SUPPOSEDLY LEADING TO THE OLD TOWN IS CALLED HANTON CITY ROAD. ABOUT THIRTY YEARS AGO WHEN HANTON CITY FIRST WAS MENTIONED IN MY PRESENCE I BECAME IMMEDIATELY INTRIGUED AT THE THOUGHT OF AN OLD CITY NO LONGER BEING USED (UNBELIEVABLE I THOUGHT) AND VERY HARD TO FIND. AT THAT PARTICULAR TIME WE TALKED ABOUT THE OLD FORGOTTEN BURSH BUT NO ATTEMPT WAS MADE TO SEEK IT OUT.

NOW OVER A GENERATION HAD PASSED AND FINALLY ON A COOL CRISP NOVEMBER DAY OUR CHANCE ARRIVED. ON A SUNDAY AFTERNOON WE HEADED FOR HANTON CITY. WE DROVE IN A BIT FROM DOUGLAS PIKE, PERHAPS ABOUT A MILE AND THEN WALKED QUITE A WAY HOPING TO COME UPON SOME SIGN OF THE CITY. ABOUT A QUARTER MILE UP ON ONE PATH WE CAME TO A SMALL CLEARING WITH ABOUT A NINE OR TEN CURBING STONE PLANTED IN AN AREA OF FORTY FEET AND PROTRUDING OUT OF THE GROUND AT LENGTHS OF THREE FEET. LOOKING A LOT LIKE A BURIAL SITE BUT WITH NO MARKINGS ON ANY STONE. IT BAFFLED US FOR A SPELL BUT AN INHABITANT INFORMED US THAT HIS PARENTS CALLED IT A CORN CRIB. ANOTHER PATH ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE ROAD ENDED AT AN ABANDONED QUARRY THAT SEEMED TO HAVE BEEN WORKED FOR SIDEWALK CURBINGS. SOME PIECES WERE AT LEAST TWELVE FEET LONG AND MUST HAVE PUT OXEN AND HORSES TO A GREAT TEST TO MOVE THEM FROM THEIR ORIGINAL HAVEN.

ABOUT THE ONLY EXCITING CLUES OF AN OLD CITY ON THAT PARTICULAR DAY WERE TWO FOUNDATIONS AND AN OLD WELL THAT MUST HAVE BEEN CONSTRUCTED AND PLANNED WITH INGENUITY. FROM AN UNTRAINED EYE IT SEEMED THAT THE WELL AND ONE OF THE FOUNDATIONS WERE BUILT BY THE SAME PERSON. THE WORK WAS SPECTACULAR AND DONE WITH FINESSE THAT WOULD PUT MANY A MASON IN THE BACK ROW WITH TEARS IN HIS EYES. MOST OF THE WORK WAS DONE WITHOUT MORTAR AND HAS STOOD THE TEST OF TIME. (AT LEAST TWO HUNDRED YEARS) AND IT LOOKS AS WELL TODAY AS THEN. DEFINITELY PUT THIS HANDIWORK AT A PLUS LEVEL. AN OLD GRANITE MARKER IN THE MIDDLE OF THINGS ALSO WAS A RARE FIND. IN THE MIDDLE OF THE OLD ROAD WAS AN UNFAMILIAR SURVEY HOLE DRILLED THROUGH THE STONE TO IDENTIFY A SOUND.

THAT WAS THE EXTENT OF OUR GLIMPSE OF OLD HANTON CITY DEEP IN THE WOODS OF SMITHFIELD. THERE ISN'T DOUBT THAT THIS ENDEAVOR IS NOT OVER FOR US AS YET. ANOTHER TREK IS IN OUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE TO LOOK AROUND AND MOVE IN OTHER DIRECTIONS FROM WHERE WE LEFT OFF. PERHAPS WE WILL COME UP WITH MORE TANGIBLES THAT THEN WILL MAKE OUR DAY.

LOUIS ULLUCCI I

Holmes, Oliver W and Peter I Rohrbach. Stagecoach East : Stagecoach days in the East from the Colonial period to the Civil War. (Washington DC : Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983.) vii, 220p. photos, drawings, maps, index, bibliography : p.203-215.

As can be expected from a book published by the Smithsonian, Stagecoach East is a detailed study from primary sources, not a lightweight rehash. The book jacket pretty well describes its importance. "...melded from reports in the era's newspapers, travel journals, diaries, and government records ... a book based on solid historical scholarship. Yet by providing colorful sketches of the individuals and experiences a traveler might encounter on the American road, it is also vivid reading --a valuable contribution to the understanding of early American society." Fifteen chapters pull together information about such topics as routes used in the colonial and Federal periods, early vehicle construction, use by the U.S. mail and the newspapers, the drivers, the makers, the taverns as stage stops, rivalry with the steamboat and the railroad, etc. Hundreds of footnotes and the annotated bibliography provide other historians with useful avenues for further research, at the same time speaking of the years of methodical work involved in the preparation of this manuscript. Since historian Holmes died two years before publication, it is probable that Mr. Rohrbach was employed to make Holmes' notes readable; this scenario might explain the origin of an error to be discussed later. Though research in Rhode Island sources is conspicuously absent (only Pease and Niles' 1819 Gazetteer of the States of Connecticut and Rhode-Island) and the Rhode Island content is consequently slight, the many varied sources which the authors draw upon provide the reader with a panoramic description from which useful universals can be applied to the local situation. Quotes from the only Rhode Island portions illustrate the tightly written, factual narrative style common throughout the book.

CHAPTER I : Colonial Stage Lines (p.12)

Travel from Boston southward had so increased that a permanent stage to Rhode Island was finally established in 1767 by Thomas Sabin of Providence. (48) The Providence headquarters was at the Sign of the Crown--soon rechristened the Crown Coffee House to keep up with the fashion of the times in tavern names. In Boston, Sabin put up at the Sign of the Lamb, then kept by John Burrows. An important extension of stagecoach facilities took place in 1768 when a weekly line was established between Providence and Norwich, Connecticut, thereby shortening the water journey to New York. (49)

Two ambitious efforts to complete a stage connection between Boston and New York were made in 1772. The first was the establishment of a line from the Brooklyn ferry landing, opposite New York City, to Sag harbor at the eastern end of Long Island where "a Passage Boat will be ready to carry all Passengers to New-London; likewise Stages are established in the different Towns of Connecticut and Rhode-Island Governments to carry Travellers to Boston." (50)

The second Boston-New York attempt was over the Upper Post Road. "Whereas the Communication between the capital places of New-York and Boston, is of the greatest public concern," began the opening announcement,

the subscribers, living in Hartford, have projected a plan upon proper encouragement, for establishing a Stage-Coach, for the conveyance of passengers through that beautiful part of the country of the upper Post road, to and from these places. (51)

(p.13)

A notice in the Boston Gazette for Monday, June 1, 1772, stated that "The New-York stage is now in Town, and will go out on Wednesday morning." Service from New York commenced two weeks later, the first stage leaving on June 24 from Fowler's Sign of the Plough and the Harrow, at the corner of the Bowery and Doyers street, according to a notice in the New York Journal for June 25, 1772. (52)

CHAPTER IV : The Stage Rolls - 1790 to 1800 (p.32)

In New England, Jesse Brown of Norwich and Jacob Brown of New Haven started a stage line in 1792 to run twice a week along the north shore of Long Island Sound, following the old colonial post road east from New Haven through New London and Norwich to Providence. (3) This was the first stagecoach service along the Lower Post Road, which ran via Hartford, Springfield, and Worcester to Boston. In the summer of 1793, the postmaster general transferred to the shore road the two mails that had been sent over the Hartford-Norwich route, and the latter was abandoned as a stage road. (4) Not until the beginning of 1797 was six-times-a-week mail service inaugurated between New York and Boston. The mail was taken every weekday as far as New Haven and then sent alternately over the upper and lower post roads to Boston. (5)

The last paragraph above unfortunately garbles some of the only information in the book relative to Rhode Island. The first sentence and information elsewhere equate New England's "Lower Post Road" with an early colonial road running along the coast from New York to New Haven, through New London and Norwich, to Providence and on northward. But the paragraph's second sentence erroneously claims the Lower Post Road also runs through Hartford, Springfield and Worcester. (Elsewhere in the book, it is well established that the New York-New Haven-Hartford-Springfield-Palmer-Worcester-Boston road was distinctly called the "Upper Post Road".) The next sentence mentions a third (alternate) route while mistakenly assuming it is the Upper or the Lower; the alternate route abandoned as a post road sometime after 1793 ran from New Haven to Hartford, then southeasterly cross-country back down to the coastal road at Norwich. The biggest mystery left unexplored here, though, is what was the route through Rhode Island from New London and Norwich to Providence?

There are at least two definitely viable roads through Rhode Island which might have carried the mail coaches during this time frame; in fact, it is probable that both were actually in use at one time or another. One of the two routes follows the basic line of U.S. Route 1, from the town

of Westerly, easterly along the coast through Charlestown, through several villages in South Kingstown, then northerly through North Kingstown and on to Providence. Numerous sources have long maintained that this route was a very early colonial road which followed a series of existing Indian lines roughly described as the Pequot Trail.

The other route is of historical interest to Johnston. This possible Rhode Island mail stage route left the Connecticut coast at New London, running northerly up the Thames River to Norwich and on to Plainfield, where the line turned northeasterly across the Rhode Island border into Coventry and continuing through Scituate and along the Johnston/Cranston boundary to Providence. This route still carries the name Old Plainfield Pike along many stretches, though its continuity was disrupted when a portion was submerged under the Scituate Reservoir in 1920. As early as 1706 this route was commissioned as a colonial road, sometimes referred to by variations of the name, "great north road", to distinguish it from the coastal Indian trail through South Kingstown. In colonial almanacs, it is referred to as the "Providence to Norwich and New London road" and, in 1796, the Rhode Island General Assembly granted a charter for a company to maintain this route as a toll-road under the designation, "Providence, Norwich, and New London Turnpike Society". And on page 112, Holmes mentions a Mr. Fisher Amers interested in bidding on the mail "...contract for the newly established stages on the 'Middle Post Road' to Boston...in 1796"; could this be the Plainfield pike, or even the Hartford turnpike?

Because the authors of this book studied mostly Boston materials as representative of New England, many interesting local portions of this story are undoubtedly to be found in a thorough search of primary Rhode Island state and colonial records, local newspapers and almanacs of the time, as well as sources cited by Holmes.

HOLMES' FOOTNOTES

- (48) Advertisement, Boston Post-Boy, July 20, 1767.
- (49) New England Town and Country Almanack for 1769 (Boston)
- (50) Advertisement, New-York Journal, May 28, 1772.
- (51) Ibid., March 3, 1772.
- (52) See also advertisement, Boston Evening Post, July 6, 1772.
- (3) Records of the United States Post Office Department, Postmaster General's Letterbooks, B:242-50, 293; in Record Group 28, National Archives, Washington, DC.
- (4) Ibid., B:466, 493.
- (5) Ibid., F:139; and advertisements of Levi Pease and Company, Columbian Centinel (Boston), November 19, 1796.

(Map, page 96) Map of the United States Exhibiting the Post Roads, the Situations, Connections & Distances of the Post-Offices, Stage Roads, Counties & Principal Rivers. Abraham Bradley, Jr. (1804)

-Robert S. Burford, 28 Dec 86

Earle, Alice Morse. Stage-coach and tavern days. Rpt. 1900.

Houghton, George W.W. Coaches of Colonial New York. Paper read on evening of March 4th, 1890...NY Historical Society. 31p. Q? [RIHS N.Y.-4]

Forbes, Allan. Tavern and Stagecoaches of New England; anecdotes and tales recalling the days of stagecoach travel.. Boston: State St. Trust, 1953-54. 2v. [RIHS F5.F6]

Parks, Roger. Roads and travel in New England, 1790-1840. Old Sturbridge Village, 1967. 28p. booklet [RIHS HE356.N38P3]

Old Stone Bank historical pamphlet #15, "By Coach and Six" (1927) (also rptd. in v.1 of bound set?) [RIHS F79.P971]

Marlowe, George F. Coaching roads of old New England... New York: Macmillan, 1945. [RIHS F9.M3]

Christian, James H. John Clarke: Baptist Statesman. (Thesis: 1950) Has parts re: "World of Wheels" and Anglican Church in Revolutionary War?! [RIHS Mfilm BX5207.C6C55]

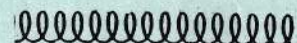
Carlisle, Lilian. The carriages at Shelburne Museum. The museum, 1956. 71p. [RIHS TS2010.C27]

Gallagher, John S. The post offices of Rhode Island. Burtonsville, MD: The Depot, 1977. 36p. [RIHS REF HE6363.R4G3]

Whaley, Carder H. The old Post Road. 1944. 8 leaves, map, typescript. [RIHS HE356.D5W41]

Smith, John H. Postal markings and cancellations before the twentieth century. Reprint from "U.S. Cancellation News" [RIHS RI Towns PR.9-P]

Woolley, Mary E. The early history of the colonial post-office. 1969. 33p. Reprint of Publications of RIHS, New Series, v.1 (1893-94), p.270- [RIHS HE6371.W92]



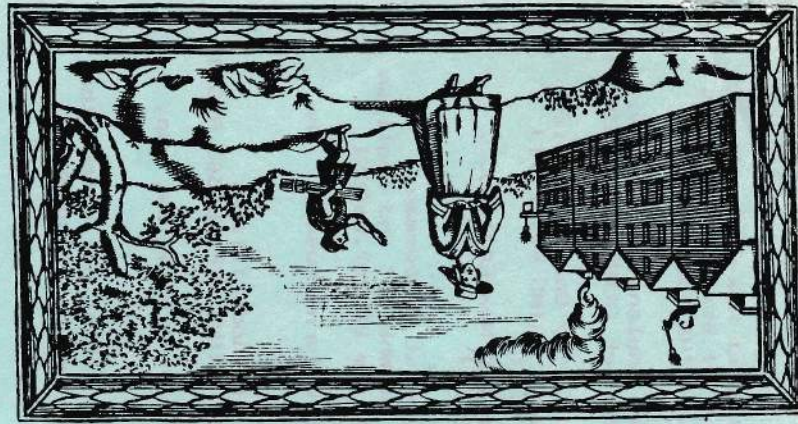
Welcome to the following new members:

- Charles & Lenore Bosworth
- Louise C. Lawrence
- Dora Warren
- Mrs. Clark MacDonald
- Allison Cooper
- Cherry Hill Manor Nursing Home

ANNUAL CHRISTMAS PARTY

On December 7, 1986 our society held its annual Christmas party at the Farnum/Angell House. Thirty members and guests attended. The house, as usual, was beautifully decorated by our members, and holiday cheer was quite evident. It felt good both to see old friends and to make new friends. Thanks to all who contributed food or their time, making this party a fine time for all who attended.





JOHNSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
101 Putnam Pike
Johnston, Rhode Island 02919

HAVE YOU PAID YOUR 1987 DUES YET?
IF NOT, WHY DON'T YOU SEND A CHECK
TODAY.

1987 MEMBERSHIP



Membership for:

☐ RENEWAL

☐ NEW
MEMBER

☐ GIFT

(name)

(address)

(town) (state) (zip)

JOHNSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

101 Putnam Pike

Johnston, Rhode Island 02919

Type: ☐ individual (\$5) ☐ family (\$7) ☐ company (\$10)

Membership is tax-deductible as a contribution to a non-profit educational organization.
Enclosed please find check or money order payable to JOHNSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY for
\$ _____. For further information call Membership Chrmn. Pat Macari, 949-2822.