

The Sheffield Tree Bee

By the mid-1800's much of Sheffield had been denuded of the trees that formed its forests due to a century of the clearing of land for agriculture and the porcessing of timber into charcoal to fuel local iron and limestone industries. In this barren landscape, the Big Elm, 82 feet tall and 108 feet wide, stood as a symbol of Sheffield and became the muse for an effort by the townspeople to plant a thousand trees. In May of 1846 Frank Ensign and Graham Root organized the people of Sheffield for what they dubbed a "tree bee". For two weeks 40 men, women and children planted a thousand elm trees, including the "Cathedral of Elms" which buttressed Main Street. The "Cathedral of Elms" would put Sheffield on the map for being one of the most beautiful towns in the state. The Sheffield Tree Bee of 1846 was the first of its kind in the country: a grassroots project to make a town center more natural and thus more beautiful by planting trees.

Ensign and Root were prominent men in Sheffield. Ensign was a prolific builder and merchant—many of Sheffield's structures such as the covered bridge, the Old Stone Store, and Town Hall were built by him and his partners. Root was a merchant, politician, and sheriff of Berkshire County, and under his tenure the first prison in the county was built. They were men whose life's work was developing land from its natural state into a civilized state by erecting structures. The idea of taking a developed town—with its churches, shops, schools, and homes—and purposefully making it more natural was truly a revolutionary idea. It was a product of its time, a manifestation of Transcendentalist ideals that had been circulating in the late 1820's and 1830's, with luminaries like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson forming its core philosophy. Transcendentalism extolls the inherent purity and goodness of the individual self and nature. The less corrupted a person or place is by society and institutions—especially organized religion and politics—the closer to god he, she, or it is.



Big Elm postcard, circa 1900



"Cathedral of Elms" flanking Main Street looking south. This photo was taken around 1920, before Dutch Elm disease wiped out most of Sheffield's elms.

Sheffield had a direct link to the Transcendentalist movement: Dr. Orville Dewey. Transcendentalism was an offshoot of Unitarianism, and Dewey was one of the most renowned Unitarian pastors in the country. He led Unitarian churches for many years in Boston and New York City and became friends with those with ties to the

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Transcendentalist and Hudson River School movements, such as William Cullen Bryant, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Thomas Cole. Dewey was the first clergyman admitted into a society of intellectuals and artists formed by Bryant called the Sketch Club, which included Cole (father of the Hudson River School art movement), Asher Durand (another founder of the Hudson River School), Samuel Morse (artist and inventor of the telegraph), Winslow Homer (painter) as well as Andrew Jackson Downing and Fredrick Law Olmstead (co-designers of Central Park).

Bryant worked for over a decade as a lawyer in Great Barrington before he became a poet and editor of the *New York Evening Post*, one of the country's most influential newspapers. He'd escape from the hustle and bustle of city life by returning to Great Barrington when he could and calling upon his dear friend Dewey, who by 1848 was living in Sheffield full time. Members of the Sketch Club would visit with Dewey and Bryant, bringing with them their nature-centered philosophy. Though there is no definitive proof that Dewey and his artist and intellectual friends directly influenced the 1846 Tree Bee, Dewey's sermons had a great impact on the town in many ways, and he was Graham Root's uncle.

Not long after the Tree Bee, Orville Dewey and William Cullen Bryant together planted the "Seven Pines" in a triangular lot near the intersection of Berkshire School Rd. and Rt. 7. The pines stood until early this century, over 150 years. In 1852 Dr. Dewey organized the *Elm Tree Association*, the first formal village improvement organization in the country, which began by cleaning up the area around the Big Elm, and later went on to do other town beautifying projects. A year later, in response to the association, the Massachusetts General Court passed a statute authorizing the formation of organizations dedicated to village improvement—granting them the same rights and privileges as libraries. Village improvement societies spread throughout the state and the nation over the next century. An elm-lined main street romantically came to represent the quintessential small town, an image and idea of America that began in Sheffield.



"Kindred Spirits" by Asher Durand (1849) depicts Thomas Cole and William Cullen Bryant in the Catskills. It was a gift to Bryant, commissioned in 1848 after Cole's sudden death.

The *Elm Tree Association* held an annual meeting to which Dewey invited prominent figures of the time to his hometown. In his September 4, 1856 address to the *Elm Tree Association* held under the Big Elm, Dewey said that the association was: "valuable for the opportunity afforded for mutual acquaintance and neighborly intercourse, but most valuable for its helping to create among us a common interest and a common feeling; to remove prejudices and bring us nearer together. The tree under which we stand is an ageless elm, lifting its branches to the

sky before civilized man ever saw it." The remainder of the address, which came to be known as the "Elm Tree Oration," was a fiery rebuke of slavery that made Dewey famous in the North and infamous in the South. He closed the speech with words directed to the tree: "Long may its brave old arms stretch themselves over this humble spot, in a free and happy land! May the green sod beneath it, never be met with fratricidal blood!"

Sheffield's penchant for tree veneration only strengthened over the course of the 19th century. In 1884, Orville Dewey's daughter, Mary, formed the *Pine Knoll Association* along with several other prominent Sheffield residents which established a park whose upkeep and preservation would be paid for by a perpetual trust. In 1896 the newly-formed *Sheffield Village Improvement Society* held an elaborate celebration to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1846 Tree Bee. Children, dressed all in white, sang to the elms, which had grown tall and

magnificent, and as the Berkshire Courier reported “were decorated with flags, and beneath their green arcades a procession moved to the Old Elm.” In 1946 the 100th anniversary of the Tree Bee was celebrated in the town, with grade school children singing, a parade, speeches, a tree planting and a dinner dance

In 1926 the Big Elm succumbed to old age and had to be cut down. Its tree rings revealed that it was around 400 years old. Two years later, in 1928, a shipment of logs infested with elm bark beetles carrying the Dutch elm disease fungus entered New York, thus beginning an epidemic that killed 75% of the American elms in North America. By 1989 we had lost 77 million American elms, many of which lined the streets of towns and cities. Sheffield’s “Cathedral of Elms” was among the casualties, nearly all were wiped out by the disease by the 1970’s. By 1996, the 150th anniversary of the Tree Bee, only 3 elms remained. To commemorate the anniversary, local residents and organizations planted 300 disease-resistant Liberty elms, which had only recently been bred.



“Pine Knoll,” photograph by Carrie Smith Lorraine, c. 1907.

The Sheffield elm is equally remarkable for size and perfection of form. I have seen nothing that comes near it in Berkshire County, and few to compare with it anywhere.

--Oliver Wendell Holmes



These photos show just how huge the Big Elm was



Two notable tree preservation organizations were formed in the late 1990’s. *Elm Watch*, an organization with roots in Sheffield, worked in the 1990’s and 2000’s treating and preserving old-growth elms in New England, including 15 in Sheffield. The *Sheffield Tree Project* carries on the tradition of the 1846 Tree Bee to this day. Their mission is to: “work with the community to plant and care for a beautiful and diverse population of trees in the public areas of Sheffield, Massachusetts, and to educate the public on the benefits of community forestry.” The group, which is part of the *Sheffield Land Trust*, has planted over 150 trees in Sheffield. Twice a year they have tree planting events. They believe that the project brings the community together, building civic pride by restoring trees—nearly the exact sentiment that Orville Dewey expressed speaking about the *Elm Tree Association*. They offer several ways for Sheffield residents carry on a nearly 175-year-old tradition of tree planting in Sheffield by its residents.

For more information on the *Sheffield Tree Project*, including how to get involved and a gallery of tree photos from the Sheffield Historical Society click the logo below

A wonderful source for this article was “Republic of Shade: New England and the American Elm” by Thomas Campanella. [Click here to read passages or to buy the book.](#)

Message from the President

Dear Friends, Romans, Countrymen, but more importantly cherished fellow members of the society; lend me your eyes,

It's time for me to ramble a bit about our great society. As always we always have good things going on and plans to keep up the pace of such things. In the midst of summer activities and heat the board and volunteers have been working hard making the society a fun and useful one. A project I am proud to praise is the diligent work by Paul O'Brien and Al Romeo to make our beloved barn a beautiful little museum of its own. We celebrated the opening of the permanent Milt Barnum Tool exhibit in the barn with a Historic Feast, raising money to go towards preserving items in our collection. Another fabulous fundraiser is our famous salad bar at the Sheffield in Celebration Fair. Lois Levinsohn and the dedicated salad makers and salad bar staffers again brought you over 25 different types of salads.

While we are on the topic of funds, never forget that if you have or know of any extra dough, think of the Sheffield Historical Society. Every day we all make history and as time travels on it becomes more historical. The joys of getting older. That point recently enlightened your president when my dear friend and historical researcher and teacher Jim Reynolds posted a photo he came across while perusing the archives of the *Berkshire Courier*. The beauty of facebook. It is something I had forgot about. It seems your FLB gave a presentation to the society in November of 1983. I commented on giving a presentation to some older folks and now I am one of them and even the president. I remembered giving another talk in the mid 90's which is now history, but not ancient history like the talk in 1983.



Tony Carlotto, co-proprietor of The Snap Shop in Great Barrington, was guest speaker at the Nov. 11 meeting of the Sheffield Historical Society. He gave a

presentation on "Colonial and Early American Copper Coins."

Donald B. Victor

In September, Dewey Hall was packed to the brim with people there to see Nancy Smith and Rene Wendell give a presentation showing wildlife photos taken with trail cameras. Make sure to check out our October 13 program in which Dennis Picard will give a talk about colonial disease that will make you glad you didn't live in colonial times. Our program chair Joyce Hawkins makes sure that we have a slate of great entertainment for all to enjoy. She has acts booked for at least a year in advance and we can not thank her enough. We can use anyone's help in any way, whether it be for an hour or millennia. As Uncle Sam says; "We Want You!" We can find useful ways for you to help. In closing I thank you for being a member of a great group and look forward to meeting you at upcoming events—especially the Members' Holiday Party in December. We love events where we can all eat, drink and be merry.

Sincerely, Your FLB, The Prez.

Milt Barnum Tool Collection Permanent Exhibit in the Barn

On August 27 the Sheffield Historical Society held a Historic Feast to celebrate the opening of the permanent Milt Barnum Tool Exhibit in the historical society's barn. Milt was an avid collector of antique tools, many made or used in Sheffield, as well as a founding member of the society. The exhibit, curated by Paul O'Brien and Al Romeo, displays many of the thousands of tools in Milt's collection and range from farm tools, tradesman and artisan's tools, to implements you might find in a 19th century kitchen.

Our rare double-chamber smokehouse built in 1838 was fired up to put a smoky finishing touch on a variety of meats: fresh ham, ribs, chicken, beef, and bacon. President Tony Carlotto and Vice President Tammy Blackwell kept the meat coming while board members tended to the delicious side dishes and drinks. We hope to make the feast an annual event so keep an eye out for it next summer. Proceeds from the event went toward the preservation of items in the society's collection, specifically a sampler sewn by a 13-year-old girl in Sheffield in 1833.

The permanent exhibit in the barn is just one of the improvements the society has and will make to its buildings and collections this year. The money that we raise from membership dues, at the Old Stone Store gift shop, and at our events allows us to preserve these centuries-old structures. Improvements in 2017 include repainting the exterior of the Mark Dewey Research Center, renovating the kitchen of the Dan Raymond House, repairing the roof of the smokehouse, and restoring the the Parker Hall Law Office. All of this would not be possible without the support of you, our members.

The Milt Barnum Tool Collection permanent exhibit in the barn behind the Dan Raymond House is open Fridays from 12pm-4pm until October 27th. It will re-open come spring.



Programs

Friday, October 13
@7:30 pm

Pox, Pus, and Creeping Miasma: Disease and Death in the Colonial Berkshires



On October 13th, at 7:30 pm we will present “Pox, Pus and Creeping Miasma: Disease and Death in the Colonial Berkshires,” a program by Dennis Picard at Dewey Hall. Dennis will talk about the different ailments and diseases that plagued colonial Americans and how they perceived sickness before the discovery of germs. Dennis D. Picard has been a museum professional in the “Living History” field for forty years. He began his career at Old Sturbridge Village where he researched and designed many public programs which are still offered by that institution today. He has held the position of Assistant Director and Director at several sites including Fort Number Four in Charlestown New Hampshire, the Sheffield Historical Society, and has recently retired after 27 years at Storowton Village Museum in West Springfield. This academic

year he will be teaching “Museum Studies & Historic Site Interpretation” at Westfield State University in Massachusetts. He is also a member of the editorial board of the “Country School Journal.”

Where the Wild Things Are: 26 Trail Cameras in Sheffield



Dewey Hall was standing room only when Conservationist Nancy Smith and naturalist Rene Wendell gave a presentation on the images Nancy has captured of wild animals in Sheffield using trail cameras. The photos revealed to the audience what Nancy has known for some time—each of the animals is an individual, with its own rich identity and place within its family and the ecosystem as a whole. Photos included bears, coyotes, turkeys, bobcats, squirrels, skunks, ra-

coons—and a few errant calfs that had briefly escaped their pasture for a taste of the wild life. Rene offered insight about the biology and ecology of Sheffield’s wild animal populations, as well as a bit of comic relief. In 2018 we plan to exhibit some of Nancy’s wildlife photos in the Old Stone Store



upcoming events

Sheffield Park of Honor

Opening Ceremony
Saturday, Nov. 4 @ 1pm

Last year during the month of November 94 flags fluttered in the wind at Sheffield's Park of Honor at Barnard Park, each flag recognizing a veteran or group of veterans. The flags were a powerful reminder to those who drove by on Route 7 of the courage and sacrifice our country's veterans made for us all.

This year we hope to exceed 200 flags in the Sheffield Park of Honor. If you are interested in sponsoring a flag, you can download the form [by clicking here](#) and returning it to the address listed on the form. Forms are also available anytime at a display in front of the Dan Raymond House (look for the two American flags) or at the Old Stone Store weekends from 11-4. The deadline to return your sponsorship form is October 28.

All are invited to the opening ceremony on November 4th at 1pm. Flags will fly in the Park of Honor until December 3rd. Sponsors will then have the option to take their flag along with a gold ribbon with the name of the veteran they honor. The money raised by the sponsorship will go to a scholarship for the child or grandchild of a Berkshire veteran.



Festival of Holidays

Opening Reception
Friday, Nov.3 @ 7pm

Get an early start on your holiday shopping at the *Festival of Holidays* at the Old Stone Store. The opening reception will be on Friday, November 3 from 7:00 to 9:00pm. Enjoy a complimentary glass of wine and taste some of the delectable homemade treats for sale as you chat with your friends and neighbors. If you can't make it to the reception, the holiday market is open weekends 11:00am to 4:00pm from Nov. 3 until Dec. 24. It will feature Berkshire artisans, with a wide array of products including jewelry, pottery, leather goods, basketry, carved wooden items, glass ornaments and many other decorative pieces. In addition, there are holiday goodies made by society members such as jams, mustards, cookie kits and roasted nuts. All sales support the Sheffield Historical Society and the work it does to enrich the town through historical events, exhibits and programs.



From Our Collection...

Cheese Press

Until 1851 when the first cheese factory was established in Rome, NY, farm families would make their own cheese in order to preserve perishable milk. Cheesemaking was largely a woman's job—beginning with milking the cows and ending with a wheel of hard cheese that could last for months without spoiling. Cheese presses like this one were necessary to make hard cheeses because they did the essential job of removing moisture, the whey, from the curds.



There have been many different types of cheese presses used over the centuries, dating back to simple stone weights from pre-history to elaborate lever and screw styles of the mid-19th century. They all work on the same principle: the less moisture in a cheese the longer it would last in an age before refrigeration.

Cheesemaking involves heating milk along with a coagulator that separates the curds from whey, usually rennet, an enzyme found in calf stomachs. The curds are strained and put into into a cheese basket lined with cheesecloth. The cheese basket is then put into the press a squeezed.

This cheese press from the 19th century is relatively primitive. It has a design that calls

for cranking the wheel at the top to incrementally lower the top block down onto the cheese basket to press all of the whey out of it and to form it into a solid block. Cheese would be pressed for about two days. It would then be wrapped in either wax or a “bandage” of muslin soaked in lard. The cheese wheel would be aged in a cool place for 6 to 8 months. Mold on the exterior of the wrapping would gradually ripen and dry out the exterior of the wheel, further preserving it.

By and large, cheddar was the most popular type of cheese made in America, from the very first colonists up until this century. In fact cheddar remained the most consumed cheese in America until 2013 when mozzarella surpassed it.

Come see this cheese press displayed in the Milt Barnum Tool Collection permanent exhibit in the barn. It is open Fridays from 12pm-4pm until October 27th.

*The
Sheffield
Historical Society*



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Old Stone Store
On the Green in Sheffield
Weekends 11:00 am-4:00 pm
413-229-2287

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The Sheffield Historical Society invites the support of you and your friends through membership.

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