

## The Pirate William Day

In January 1773, 11 men met in an upstairs room of Col. John Ashley's house in Sheffield. Together they wrote a declaration against British tyranny and for the rights of the people of the colonies. These were the most prominent men in the town, generals, lawyers, selectmen, and...a pirate! Captain William Day was counted among the most prominent men in the town because of the wealth and renown that his privateer days on the high seas had brought him.

Captain William Day was born in Springfield in 1715 and died in Sheffield in 1797. As a young ship captain, he divided his time between residences in Liverpool, England, Boston and Springfield. His first wife Polly sometimes accompanied him on his voyages, bringing supplies and immigrants from Britain and Ireland to the colonies. He frequently made runs to and from the Caribbean and the American South with cargoes of food and rum. In the mid-1700s the line between merchant vessel and pirate ship was as murky as the Atlantic waters they sailed. Wars between European countries exacerbated the situation with countries giving their captains permission to raid or capture enemy ships, both naval and merchant.

Day is credited with bringing the news of the end of the War of Austrian Succession to the colonies after hearing about it while in Spain. In but a few years he himself would be caught up in the wars between France and Britain. During the French and Indian War (1754–63), he was granted letters of marque. The letters issued by England gave Day, a private citizen, the right to fit out an armed ship and plunder French ships. At one point during the war he was captured and served two years in a French prison. Upon release Day successfully begged the guards to let him keep his old worn boots, in the heels of which he'd hidden guineas.

Privateering was a lucrative business, one that allowed him to open a tavern in Boston and Westfield and then to purchase a piece of land in Sheffield, MA where his father had settled. He lived off his acquired wealth and through farming, dabbling in such things as being the surveyor of the original home lots in Great Barrington in 1770 and being a Berkshire County coroner. In 1771 his Sheffield farm was valued at 12 pounds, and he had lent out 40 pounds. Day also rented a home in Boston, as it was practical for a ship captain to have a residence in a port city. With his first wife Polly and second wife Eunice having passed on, and Day nearing 60, he married Rhoda Hubbel, twenty years his junior. As a prominent and wealthy town member, veteran of the French and Indian War, and as his grave inscription reads "a true patriot" to the American cause, it is no wonder he was among the men who drafted the Sheffield Resolves in 1773.

Soon the words in the Sheffield Resolves, and the Declaration of Independence which it inspired, were to be fought for in the Revolution. The American siege of Boston at the war's beginning and for most



Portrait of Capt. William Day, 1757, attributed to a then 19-year-old John Singleton Copley, a famous New England portraitist. The painting was a gift from the British Admiralty for: "meritorious service during the war in capturing four French frigates, and bringing them into Plymouth harbor."

of 1775 led to the eventual evacuation of the city by British forces in March 1776 and their retreat to Canada to prepare a major invasion of New York. With Boston liberated, attention was directed to re-configuring ships to fight, harass and capture British merchant and military vessels. Private companies financed that conversion of captured British ships into American fighting ships. The business house of Philip Moore & Co. employed privateer William Day to convert the captured British merchant sloop the *Warren* into a fighting frigate with twenty 9 pound guns and six 4 pound guns. The ship was rechristened the *Mifflin* and the Massachusetts State Navy commissioned Day as the commander. His son, William Day, Jr., was his second mate.

For its first cruise, the *Mifflin* had a crew of 120, five tons of shot and two tons of powder, plus eight tons of bread and flour, and 120 barrels of meat. In May of 1777, the *Mifflin*, escorted by the Continental Navy frigates *Hancock* and *Boston*, harassed and boarded British ships all along the American Northeast coast. The authority to capture and harass British ships lured Day and some of his compatriot captains further and further along the London-New York shipping route until they found themselves near the shores of Ireland.

Day circled the island, taking four ships laden with valuable cargo including salt, timber, sherry, raisins, linen, and soap. The 1777 *Cumberland Chronicle*, which gives the reports of Day's captives, describes a common pirate trick that he used: "When she bore down upon the *Rebecca*, Capt. Bell, she shewed English colours, but when within gun shot hoisted a flag, with a white field, having a pine tree in the middle with the words Appeal to Heaven underneath it." The symbol and motto was the Massachusetts naval ensign.

The newspaper article has the captives decribing Day as "in his sixties or seventies, somewhat lame from gout, and walked with two sticks." Captain Bell appealed to Day, explaining he did not have insurance on his ship, which was new. Day responded that he had compassion for Bell's current misfortune but said,

"we must bear with patience the evils of war: I returned from a West India voyage expecting to go in peace to my family, but when I arrived there was only the place where my house stood—Charlestown was in ashes." He then relieved Bell of his gold and silver watches.

With the British about to retaliate, he sailed the *Mifflin* to France. For a few hours the French naval commanders discussed whether to recognize it. Only ships of sovereign states could be recognized. Technically a rebel colonial ship should not even be allowed to enter French ports except for humanitarian reasons. By firing a salute they would be effectively validating the Declaration of Independence. In the end they acknowledged Day's ship, sparking the British ambassador to France to threaten breaking off diplomatic relations between the two countries.

France, though it had been materially supporting the Americans for a year, was not ready to formally form an open alliance with them. So the French told the British the salute was a misunderstanding and they command-

The Pine Tree Flag with the words "An Appeal to Heaven" was designed by Gen. Washington's secretary, Col. Joseph Reed in 1775 and flew on all American ships during the Revolution. The Massachusetts navy adopted it as their flag in 1776 and a variant of it exists today. Flags with pine trees on them have flown on New England merchant vessels since 1686. The pine tree was a popular symbol of colonial resistance in the years leading up to the Revolution. The words "An Appeal to Heaven" was a well-known phrase of resistance against the crown, coming from John Locke's 1689 *Second Treatise of Government*:

"...where the body of the people, or any single man, is deprived of their right, or is under the exercise of a power without right, and have no appeal on earth, then they have a liberty to appeal to heaven, whenever they judge the cause of sufficient moment."



William and Rhoda's remains were moved from Barnard Cemetery in Sheffield to Springfield Cemetery (the city of his birth) by their grandson who erected this elaborate monument. The relief carving of a French and Indian War naval battle is based upon the portrait by Copley. Their simple, original tombstone still stands in Barnard Cemetery.



ed Day to leave the French port of Brest once the ship's "repairs" had been completed. By the end of July, Day left Brest and went to L'Orient, another French port, where he was allowed in and stayed until September. While there, Day happily wrote a report of his recent cruises to Benjamin Franklin, then the American ambassador in Versailles. By November he had returned to Boston, and soon thereafter retired from the sea to return to his home in Sheffield. After the war was over he lived out his years on the farm along with Rhoda and their four children, dying at the age of 82. Three of his sons followed their father's footsteps becoming ship captains. One of them, Capt. John Day and his sister Mary Day Root were among the early pioneers who founded Sheffield, Ohio.

—CAROLE OWENS & JENNIFER OWENS

[Click here to read the letter from Capt. Day to Benjamin Franklin](#)

### The London Evening Post, August 21, 1777

The General Mifflin privateer too is still at Brest: she arrived there soon after the order in question had been received; but, pretending to be leaky, she was not only permitted to stay and repair, but has been actually supplied with materials out of the royal yard there. This privateer on her arrival at Brest, saluted the Admiral du Chaffault commanding there, who, after consulting all his officers, returned the salute to the flag of the rebel Colonies, thereby acknowledging their Independency, and insulting Great-Britain in the most public manner. After this the officers of the French fleet dined on board the rebel privateer, and in their excess of zeal and mirth, as I am told, drank success to the united arms of France and America, confusion to Great-Britain, and other laudable toasts; for which the British tars, it is hoped, will one day remember them. These facts have been obtained from an authentic and more than common source. They may enable your readers to judge whether England has indeed reason to be satisfied with the proceedings and secret designs of France.

## upcoming events & exhibits

### Annual Scholarship Golf Tournament

Monday, June 18

Our 7th annual Scholarship Golf Tournament will be held on Monday, June 18th at the Canaan Country Club, beginning at 3pm and finishing up with prizes and good food. It is open to all who want to have some fun and show off a little out on the greens.

[Click here to download an entry form](#)

Don't have a team? Let us pair you with other golfers. The cost to participate is \$65 and includes dinner. Non-golfers can also purchase a dinner-only ticket. The money raised by the tournament goes towards a scholarship for local high school students.



June 8

June 18

June 23 - August 12

Annual Meeting & Ice Cream Social  
7:30 pm  
Dewey Hall

Scholarship Golf Tournament  
Canaan Country Club  
3:00 pm

"Cleaning House in the 19th Century"  
Exhibit  
Weekends 11am-4pm  
Old Stone Store



# Message from the President

Dear Members & Friends of the Society,

Great news and tidings of joy to convey to you. The first is that our kitchen project is completed! One more section of the Dan Raymond House is a showpiece. I can't thank those involved enough for making this dream come true! Rene and Lois got the ball rolling with a fabulous auction followed by a tag sale to generate most of the funds to bring this to fruition. Many, many others also contributed and the list is too long and not here for fear of leaving someone out.



Secondly our annual golf tournament to benefit our scholarship program is coming soon. It is Monday June 18th. After a knock down battle with Mother Nature last year we are due for good weather. Come play golf or if you are not a golfer just come to dinner. This event is made possible due to a group of volunteers that work tirelessly to provide a great time. Between this and the Easter bake sale we derive most of our scholarship funding. Sue Petrucci and the culinary crew at Mt. Everett recently presented us with an \$800 check for the second year in a row.

Next we are planning a friend and fundraiser to take place on August 25th. It will be the Mother AND Father of all BBQ's. Everybody likes to eat with me being at the top of the list. Please watch for details and how to participate. Tell your friends! It will be the talk of the town. You will not be disappointed.

We are always working on events and projects. The Old Stone Store is loaded with a great selection of goods that will amaze you. If you need a gift or just a prize for yourself, this is the place. Once again I applaud the group of volunteers that make all this happen. We have continual exhibits at the Old Stone Store and many monthly Friday night programs that are very interesting and educational. AND don't forget the Mark Dewey Research Center, a world class place to find out who's who. And now down to the nitty gritty. As with the United States government right down to our little society, it takes a lot of doe, re, mi to make all these things run. So without whipping this horse for paragraphs, GIVE TIL IT HURTS. We are always on the lookout for funding. More importantly we need volunteers for all sorts of good deeds. If you have some spare time and energy or just an idea, Uncle Tony wants YOU! At some point we would love to show off our "Tool Museum." This will take a force just like at the Old Stone Store and that doesn't appear out of thin air. Thank you all and have a great summer. I look forward to seeing many of you on August 25th.

Sincerely,  
Your Most Humble Servant AND FLB, Tony.

## HOUSATONIC, a RIVER on the MOVE

The meandering Housatonic River that winds its way through Sheffield is approximately 139 miles in length. From its source in the Town of Washington, it drains nearly 2,000 square miles of land in two states before entering Long Island Sound near Milford, Connecticut.

Known at one time as the Great River, the waterway's course through Sheffield is, in one way, lackluster with a vertical drop of only a few feet from north to south, yielding no possibility for water power. Mills were never powered by its slow current, that job being surrendered for the most part to the Konkapot River and the Hubbard, Schenob and Ironworks brooks.

What is noteworthy, however, but not always obvious about this sedentary stretch of river is the number of oxbows and oxbow lakes that have been both created and obliterated over time. It is a process that goes on today, resulting in a winding, looping course that is clearly evident on the accompanying map [Geological Survey, 1949 edition]. These lakes and oxbows are caused by little noted shifts in river currents created by the introduction of foreign objects which result in erosion and relocation of the sandy Sheffield soil within the river bed. If ever there was a lull in the eroding process it was following European settlement when the practice was to immediately remove trees that fell into the river. This custom eliminated new currents. Were the locals wise in doing this or only recovering firewood and lumber, I do not know. But once a current variation developed, it resulted in a new erosion, eventually creating a bend or oxbow. As the new erosion continues over the years, the river eventually doubles back on itself forming an oxbow lake.



"The Oxbow" by Thomas Cole, 1836.  
Detail from painting of an oxbow formation  
in the Connecticut River near Northampton, MA

[Click here to watch a video animation on how an oxbow is formed](#)



The latest and most noticed manifestation of this phenomenon is visible near Bartholomew's Cobble in Ashley Falls where the Corbin oxbow is encroaching on Rannapo Road (Andrus Road on the map), annoyingly limiting traffic to one lane. The cost to the tax payers will be in the thousands.

—JAMES R. MILLER

# Recent Programs

## Clinton AME Zion Church

May 11, 2018



The Sheffield Historical Society welcomed its very own Wray Gunn to Dewey Hall to give a presentation on the history of the Great Barrington Clinton AME Zion Church. The presentation looked at the history of the church, which was the first African American church in Great Barrington. African American families from all over the Southern Berkshires, including many from Sheffield, attended the church and defined its position and influence in the black community for over 130 years. As chairman of the church's restoration group, Wray also discussed efforts to restore the building

so that it can resume its role as a place for people to gather to share ideas, express art and culture, and work towards the betterment of society.



## The Men of the Sheffield Resolves

April 13, 2018

On April 13, the Society presented local historian and Berkshire Eagle columnist, Carole Owens, who discussed the men who wrote the Sheffield Resolves. In 1773, eleven men were selected at town meeting to write the Sheffield Resolves, which included a plan to deal with British authority over the Massachusetts colony. They were given 7 days to report back. The rest is history. While the document lists American grievances against the British monarch, it does not suggest independence. But since Theodore Sedgwick, who wrote the Resolves, was also present when the Declaration of Independence was written, it is logical to suppose that the Sheffield Resolves had some influence in its wording. Carole's presentation elucidated the exciting lives of these men who literally became the "Founding Fathers" of Sheffield, including Col. John Ashley and Theodore Sedgwick, and Capt. William Day.



## The Art of Canoe Building

March 9, 2018



In March Hilary Russell gave a hands-on presentation and workshop on boat building, particularly canoes. Hilary discussed the history of skin-on-frame boat building from Moses in his basket to modern skin-on-frame vessels. Audience members got a chance to try their hand at the traditional method of steaming and bending boat ribs. Hilary has taught boat building since 1997, in his workshop in Sheffield as well as at schools throughout New York State and New England. He runs the Berkshire Boat Building School, where he teaches others this traditional craft.

[Click here to find out how you can learn to build a canoe right here in Sheffield at the Berkshire Boat Building School](#)



# From Our Collection...

## Universal Clothes Wringer

Doing laundry before the mid-twentieth century when indoor plumbing and electric washing machines became common was always an arduous and time-consuming task. For millennia women would either lug clothing to a river or lake, or collect water in multiple trips from a well. In 1797 the American patenting of the washboard marked the beginning of a century-and-a-half of innovation meant to ease this backbreaking work. From the mid 1700's through the turn of the 20th century many washing machines were invented, yet they remained novelties up until the late 1800's. They were not at all common in American households. The clothes wringer, though, was a technology accessible to most households.

Our summer exhibit "Cleaning House in the 19th Century" will be on display in the Old Stone Store from June 23 to August 12th.



The first hand cranked clothes wringer to be patented was by Canadian, John E. Turnbull in 1843. His design was the model for subsequent "improved" and "universal" wringers. The wringer was attached to the wash tub and the clothes were fed and hand-cranked between two rubber cylinders so that the excess water could be reused. Wringers were useful not for just for the fact that they sped up drying—it was their ability to extract precious warm soapy water that made them valuable. After carrying and boiling around 40 gallons of water, using soap that had taken months to collect fat for and days to make, a woman would try to save and reuse as much of that water as she could.

The 'Horseshoe Brand' by the American Wringer Company and the 'Anchor Brand' by the Lovell Manufacturing Company were the most popular wringers. In the 1880's the American Wringer Company was making over 50,000 wringers a year in their Rhode Island factory. Unable to find a supplier for the wringers' rubber rollers, the owners of the company formed a new rubber manu-

Superior rubber was touted by the American Wringer Co. in ads and on the wringer itself. Inscription reads:

No. 351 UNIVERSAL  
THIS WRINGER HAS WARRANTED RUBBER ROLLS  
VULCANIZED TO THE SHAFTS  
PUT A LITTLE OIL OR LARD ON THE BEARINGS  
BEFORE USING AND LOOSEN TOP SCREWS  
WHEN WRINGER IS NOT IN USE.  
THESE COMBINATION CLAMPS WILL FASTEN TO  
GALVANIZED IRON, FIBRE OR WOOD TUBS.  
PATENTED JUNE 10, 1888

facturing company that made the rollers and rubber shoes in a what was then the largest rubber factory in the world.

A relatively short-lived technology, the wringer was in the end replaced by the electric motorized spinning drum found in a modern washing machine. Between the 1920's and 1950's most American households owned electric washing machines or could access them at laundromats.



*The  
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Historical Society*



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Monday 1:30 pm-4:00 pm

Friday 1:30pm-4:00 pm

or by appointment

Old Stone Store

On the Green in Sheffield

Weekends 11:00 am-4:00 pm

413-229-2287

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

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

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Individual (\$15 - \$50)  Family(\$51 - \$100)  Patron (\$101 - \$500)  Sponsor (\$501 - \$1,000)

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