



CHS Newsletter

October 2023

October 17 7pm CHS Membership Meeting

**The Corpse That Drove a Hearse and Other
True New England Tales
of the Macabre**

Speaker: James Ignasher, author/historian



**We'll look for you at Charlie
the Butler Ghost Party
with Jared the Magician
& Mentalist
on Oct. 20 at 7pm. Reserve
today for a Ghostly
Good Time!**



President's Message

By Sandra Moyer

At our next meeting, we will be introducing our two newest board members. Linda Casey is a long time member who has assumed the position as head of the hospitality committee. She's been handling the food for our meetings since the Christmas Open House. We met Grace Swiniski when she began using the Sprague Mansion for several events for the Cranston School Department's Family Center, including games on our lawn as well as tours of the mansion, carriage house and the Spragueville neighborhood as it was known as in the 1800s. Since reaching out to the community is one of our goals, Grace is a perfect fit as she is a tireless worker for several nonprofit organizations.

Besides being the site of the Mayor's Senior Picnic in August of last year, the Sprague Mansion and its grounds were visited by hundreds of Cranston children and their parents as part of the Cranston Public Libraries' June kickoff for their summer reading program entitled Make Some Noise. There were games outside, book giveaways inside the mansion and a cookout provided by Fire Station #3 across the street.



Looking ahead to the next meeting on October 17, our speaker will be John Ignasher. In keeping with the season, he will present true tales of macabre incidents in New England done in a tasteful way. Then on October 20, Jared the Mentalist will perform his awe inspiring 'tricks' during our annual Charlie the Butler Ghost party. For more information on both these events, please check out our calendar.

Once again, we will host our annual Christmas Open house on Sunday, December 3 followed by the outside tree lighting led by Councilman John Donegan. We hope by then to have the gazebo installed that the mayor and city is giving us so that we have a place for the tree as well as the singers from Bain Middle School. This event is free to all and our gift to the community.



Membership

In Memoriam

Richard Pierce

New Members

From Cranston: Councilman Robert Ferri; Grace Swinski; Donna Campbell;
School Committee Frank Ritz; Robert Tasca-Tasca Auto Group;
Gina Linne; E. Kelly McLaughlin; Robin Tagliaferri
Virginia Norton-Coventry
Deborah Peterson-Riverside

Membership Dues — Reminder

It's still not too late to send your dues for 2023-24!

Donations to CHS Collections:

Marilyn Cocroft Palmer Helmholz: Sprague family coin silver bowl inscribed "Mary Waterman 1822; Florence Sprague 1860"
James Ignasher: photographs, badges insignia, iron parts to horse drawn wagon
Cici DePada: 1931 Cranstonian book
Nina Dillon: "Sweetheart letters" 1907 (from Ms. Dillon's CHS lecture "Chester Loves Mabel")

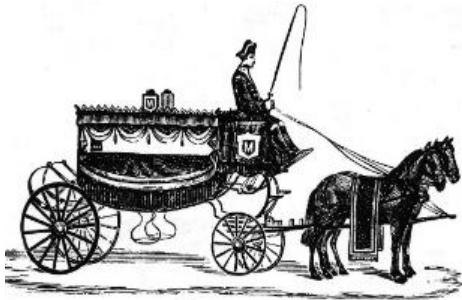
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Calendar

Meetings & Events



October 17 7pm at Sprague Mansion. Free Event.

General Membership meeting. Speaker: James Ignasher – **“The Corpse That Drove a Hearse & Other True N.E. Tales”**. . . Truth can be stranger than fiction -- New England is not lacking for bizarre tales of the dead, the undead, and those somewhere in between. Victorians fear of a premature burial was very real -- but how many know some

folks actually made a living by being buried alive? Author/historian Jim Ignasher will present strange but true tales just in time for Halloween. Mr. Ignasher is a retired police officer and a RI author/historian who researches forgotten tales. Some of his books include: RI Disasters: Tales of Tragedy by Air, Sea and Rail; Remembering Smithfield: Sketches of Apple Valley.

October 20 Friday 7:00 pm in the Spooooooky

Sprague Mansion. Charlie the Butler Ghost Party

features Jared the Magician & Mentalist -- all new show -- Jared is mesmerizing! Future readers will be on hand; some rooms will be open. Enjoy a ghostly good time! Costumes encouraged -- no masks. \$20.00 nonmembers; \$17 CHS members payable to Cranston Historical by October 15. Now reserving (401)944-9226. Age appropriate 14 plus. Accessible access /parking in back of the Mansion. Enter 1353 Cranston St. Grand ballroom door. Call Mary 944-9226 to volunteer.



Nov. 24 3:30 to 5:00pm Members stop by the Sprague Mansion to decorate the holiday tree!

Holiday Open House: December 3 3:00pm-5:00 pm. Free. Governor Sprague Mansion



Holiday Open House with pianist Andrew Kaplan. Enjoy wassail and treats. (Donations to purchase a holiday tree inside the Mansion & outside Tree Lighting -- checks payable to Cranston Historical Society.)

4:00pm Greetings from Mayor Kenneth Hopkins. Decorated by the Western Cranston Garden Club

5:00pm Tree Lighting Collaboration with Ward 3 Councilman John Donegan and Cranston Historical Society. Enjoy Bain School Choir holiday program. Visit OneCranston Health Equity Zone Info Table at the Carriage House. Accessible /parking in back of Mansion. Call Mary 944-9226 to volunteer.

Of Upcoming Events

December 9 Saturday 12 noon to 3:00pm Fall Sprague Mansion Beautification/Clean Up (weather permitting) Bring gloves, rake, and clippers.



December 14 6:30pm Tour with Tea Evening at Sprague Mansion. Enjoy a relaxing holiday-time evening -- tea & a special sweet -- includes A&W Sprague Manufacturing Co. presentation. Limited to 10 only. Must Reserve: \$18 nonmembers; \$16 members payable by December 9 to Cranston Historical Society, 1351 Cranston St., Cranston 02920. After December 9, call to inquire if seating is available.

February 15 6:30pm Tour with Tea Evening at Sprague Mansion. Enjoy a relaxing Valentine evening -- tea & a special sweet -- includes A&W Sprague Manufacturing Co. presentation. Limited to 10 only. Must Reserve: \$18 nonmembers; \$16 members payable by February 9 to Cranston Historical Society, 1351 Cranston St., Cranston 02920. After February 9, call to inquire if seating is available.

April 13 Noon to 3:00pm Sprague Mansion. Spring Grounds Beautification/Clean-Up (weather permitting). Bring gloves, rake, & clippers.

April 16 7pm at Sprague Mansion. Free. General Membership meeting. Speaker TBA

The Cranston Historical Society's mission is to protect, document, interpret and expand understanding of Cranston history.

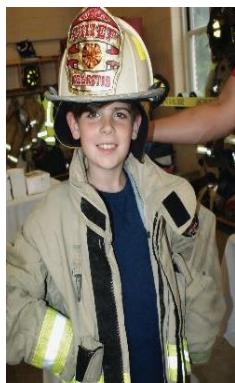
1351 Cranston Street ~ Cranston, RI 02920 (401) 944-9226

cranstonhistoricalsociety.org

facebook.com/cranstonhistoricalsociety

email: cranston.historical.society@gmail.com

Summer Events



Make Some Noise Summer Reading Book Fare – A collaborative with Cranston Public Library, OneCranston Health Equity Zone (HEZ), Cranston Fire Station #3, Cranston Police Dept., Cranston Family Center (COZ) & Cranston Historical Society



Tea with Tour Evening Program – small intimate, informal gatherings -- tea of the evening served with a tasty sweet!



Cranston Family Center – Mansion Tour, Sprague Grounds Colonial Games Day



**June 18
Rochambeau
Strawberry Biscuit
Tea at Joy
Homestead**



Yarns of Yesteryear

A Dangerous Wake

By Jan Ragno

The Fiske family has lived in Hope and Cranston for centuries and generations. Dr. Caleb Fiske was a Revolutionary War hero who returned after the war and, with his son Philip, built a cotton mill. He employed local residents and immigrants from Europe. The Fiske family thrived in this area and grew.

At 467 Seven Mile Road there is a home previously occupied by Fiske family members in the early 20th century. Upon the death of a Mr. Fiske, resident of the home, a funeral was held in the parlor. The grieving family and friends and neighbors gathered for the service held in the home, as was the custom at the time.



As the mourners approached the coffin, there were strange squeaking noises emanating from around the coffin. The mourners were concerned about the origin of these sounds and drew back from the coffin. As they grouped away from the center of the room, they could clearly see that the coffin was tipping and that the floor was at an angle. Mr. Edward Searle, a neighbor, was in attendance and rushed to the basement. He called upstairs for help as the mourners exited the home. The floor in the parlor was giving way with the weight of the family, guests and the heavy coffin. With the help of other men, they were able to shore up the floor with logs, allowing the funeral to proceed safely.

At-home funerals continued in many rural locations for many years. The terms “funeral parlor and funeral home” are derived from this practice. Funerals in the home required that they be held within 24-48 hours. The development of embalming allowed bodies to be held for longer, allowing plans to be made and families to travel to funerals at a distance.

The popularity of funeral parlors increased after the Civil War when Abraham Lincoln’s body was embalmed for his train trip across the country. Also, so many Civil War soldiers were shipped home from far away, that embalming became necessary to preserve the bodies. Thus, funeral homes where embalming could occur, came into fashion for many and have now become the norm.

Customs Associated with Death

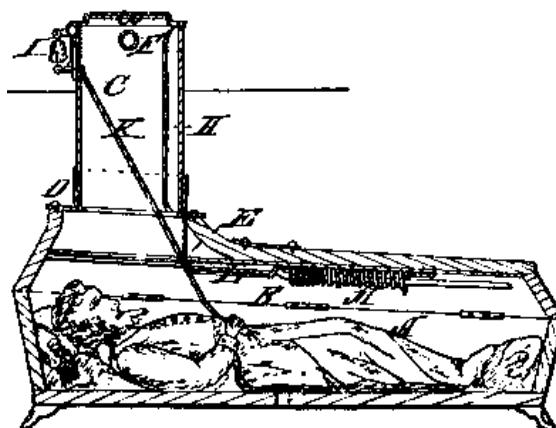
By Sandra Moyer

People long ago seemed to be more comfortable around death. Perhaps it was because it was such a commonplace occurrence before antibiotics, vaccines and other benefits of modern medicine. Where now we delegate rituals around death to professionals like funeral directors and professionally run cemeteries, our ancestors kept their dead close at hand. For example, when the generations of Spragues that occupied the Sprague Mansion died, their wakes were held at home, probably in the room we now call the 1790 room. Likewise, before 1873 when the Spragues went bankrupt and had to sell the Mansion, their departed ones were buried in the backyard as was the custom of the day. It was only when their extensive land holdings were sold and plotted for new houses that all of the Sprague remains were transferred to Swan Point Cemetery in Providence.

Accommodating death even played a role in how houses were designed. Many early homes that had steep, narrow and winding staircases could have a small indented area in the wall so that the casket could be maneuvered up and down the stairs that led to the bedrooms, the most logical place for the death to take place.

Wakes today afford the grieving family a chance to receive the condolences of their neighbors and friends as they come to say a final farewell. But in the past, they served an additional purpose. Before embalming came into use, stories existed of people who had been given up for dead and placed in their coffins only to come out of a coma. So it became the custom to stay with the body for three days to make sure their loved ones weren't still alive. The wake got its name because family and close friends would take turns staying awake with the body.

Even more macabre stories exist of people being buried while still alive. In some places, it became the custom for people to attach the string for a small bell to the deceased's hand so that he could alert others if he regained consciousness after burial.



of Long Ago



"Soul, a soul, a soul cake,
Please good missus a soul cake.
An apple, a pear, a plum, a cherry,
Any good thing to make us all merry,
One for Peter, two for Paul,
three for Him who made us all."

"souls cake" – a tradition known as "souling". In exchange, a small rounded soft cookie/cake usually decorated with an "X" would be given as a treat to honor a deceased ancestor and celebrate the beauty of life. They were made of flour and spices -- ingredients used had a meaning for its inclusion in making souls cakes: oats or wheat & honey meant sustenance; clove

warded off evil eye; salt refers to wisdom; saffron symbolizes sacrifice and salvation; cinnamon helped banish negative energies; nutmeg brings prosperity; and ginger was used for ailments. The tradition of souling dates before the 16th century and in England, was conducted up until the 1930s. Lady Elinor Fetiplace learned the Souls Cake recipe below from her mother and noted it in her handwritten Receipt Book dated 1604.



In The Kitchen . . .

Pastry jigger or jagger

17th c Silver Jigger



4th c Jigger



Pastry jiggers date back to the 4th century – some ornately carved from wood, ivory or bone and often known as pie sealers or dough wheels. At one end a wheel is found – single or double -- that has decorative notches; the other end a flat design with notches used to seal dough together or make a decorative pie crust. Jagger referred to the 'jagged' edges the tool made in the dough to crimp it together. They are very collectable today. You can purchase these useful kitchen tools under the name of "fluted pastry wheel".

All Hallows Eve / All Souls Day or Souls Cakes By Mary Mierka

At All Hallows Eve or All Souls Day, instead of trick or treating for candy as children do today -- in early times – children would go door to door singing, reciting prayers for souls and ask for a



19th c. Carved Ivory Jigger

All Souls Day / Souls Cakes Lady Elinor Poole Fetiplace's Receipt Book

17th Century cooking notes

½ c warm ale	1 tsp yeast
¼ tsp clove	1 tsp salt
¼ saffron threads	¼ tsp mace
3 c flour	1tsp nutmeg
1/2 stick butter	¼ tsp cinnamon
¾ c dried currants (or chopped dried fruit of your choice)	
1/3 c sack (wine) or sherry	
1 egg optional for egg wash on cakes	

Mix ingredients & knead dough approx. 7 min.; set in bowl and cover to rise for 45 min. Form 12 balls, flatten slightly & mark an 'X'/decorate with raisins or currants, creating a 'cross' design. Bake 400 degree oven for 20 minutes.

Whispers of the Past: Unraveling Mysteries in Victorian Hair Wreaths

By James Hall, Curator

In the dimly lit parlor of an old mansion, a glass case stands as a silent witness to a forgotten art of the Victorian era. Within the case, delicate tendrils of hair are meticulously woven into intricate wreaths, capturing a moment frozen in time. These macabre relics, with their ethereal beauty and enigmatic allure, hold more than just the whispers of history. They hold the potential to unlock secrets that reach far beyond the grave.

The Victorian era was marked by its obsession with sentimentality and mourning. In a time when death was an ever-present specter, people turned to various forms of memorialization to preserve the memory of their loved ones. Among these somber mementos, hair wreaths took on a peculiar and haunting significance. These intricate creations were often crafted from the hair of deceased family members, painstakingly woven into intricate patterns, sometimes incorporating gemstones, pearls, or even miniature portraits. Each wreath served as a tangible connection to the departed, a tangible link to a world beyond the mortal realm.



19th century shadow box - Gift from
Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Woodruff

Wreathes weren't the only ways to keep the hair of the departed close to the survivors. Often jewelry was made to hold strands of the loved ones hair. The Cranston Historical Society's collection has two pieces which were donated to us.



Human hair bracelet - Gift from Mrs. John Farr



Gold finger ring - Gift from Mary Cocroft Brown, a Sprague descendant

But what secrets might lie within these seemingly innocuous relics? Can the whispers of the past be unveiled through the strands of hair that have withstood time? Enter the world of DNA extraction, a modern alchemy that bridges the gap between centuries. DNA, the blueprint of life, lies dormant within the fibers of these hair wreaths, waiting to reveal the stories of those who once lived.

Extracting DNA from Victorian hair wreaths is not merely a scientific endeavor; it is a dance with the supernatural. As ancient as the art of memorialization itself, DNA extraction is a delicate process that requires a skilled hand and an understanding of the secrets it guards. With each strand of hair, scientists reach back through time, resurrecting fragments of a forgotten past. But this communion with the deceased is not without its challenges.

As the strands of hair relinquish their genetic secrets, a portrait of history emerges, rich with tales of love, loss, and the human experience. Families separated by the ravages of time are reunited, their stories woven together in a tapestry that transcends the boundaries of mortality. The haunted beauty of the hair wreaths takes on new meaning as they bridge the gap between the eerie and the scientific, the ethereal and the tangible.

In the eerie glow of candlelight, the glass case remains a portal to a forgotten era. The Victorian hair wreaths, once silent witnesses to lives lived and lost, now sing a spectral song through the language of DNA. They remind us that even in death, the bonds of family and the whispers of the past are not easily silenced. In the end, the strands of hair that weave together history and science, life and death, invite us to listen closely—to hear the echoes of those who came before, and to understand that the mysteries of the past can never truly be buried.

Cranston Historical Society
1351 Cranston Street
Cranston, RI 02920

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