

HIGHTSTOWN



EAST WINDSOR

NEW

JERSEY

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWS

MAY - JUNE 1998

GERTRUDE APPLEGET WYCKOFF MAXWELL

CHAPTER V

The following is the continuation of Gertrude Maxwell's story of her life and experiences, in and around her home in Hightstown, New Jersey, from 1840 to 1939.

Pater Familias

*We have taken our land from the sea
Its fields are all yellow with grain
Its meadows are green on the lea
And now shall we give it to Spain?
No, No, No, No.*

*We have planted the faith that is pure
That faith to the end, we'll maintain,
For the Word and the Truth must endure
Shall we bow to the Pope and to Spain?
No, No, No, No.*

-- Old Dutch Ballad.

Before I knew or cared very much whether my ancestry was Saxon or Norman, or Dane or Dutch I read Motley's "Rise of the Dutch Republic" and subsequently his later works and everything available on the history of the Netherlands. I was thrilled through and through with the heroism and bravery of the Dutch who as Prof. Griffs says in Brave Little Holland, "for a thousand years fought the sea waves and river floods, dyked their land which is lower than the ocean. While thus engaged they were rearing also bulwark of freedom. They beat off the Spaniard! They helped to make England and America free."

The settlement of Manhattan and the honest purchase of the land from

the Indians and the rule of the four picturesque Governors is interesting reading in the early history of New York. Washington Irving with his brilliant and facile pen ridicules some of the customs and manners and dress of the Dutch, but atones for it by saying "the descendants of the old Knickerbocker families are the real aristocracy of America."

In a so-called social period of our country various patriotic societies were organized by the old families. The "distaff" side of the house got busy in the pursuit of ancestors who would entitle them to membership as Holland Dames, Colonial Dames, The Daughters of the Revolution, etc. A great niece said to me one day, "I want to

Continued on page 2

HAPPINESS WAS AN OCTAGON

The following article was found in a little pamphlet entitled "American Vignettes, A Collection of Footnotes to History", by John I. White, which was sent to members of the Exxon Travel Club in 1976. One of the vignettes discusses the fad for the octagon house in the 1850s. Because Hightstown as its own octagon house, located on South Main Street on the Peddie Campus, nearly opposite the intersection of South Street and South Main Street, the above mentioned article follows.

"One of America's most bizarre architectural fads was the octagon house. Hundreds of these odd structures were built more than a century ago and,

strangely enough, even though you may never have heard of an eight sided dwelling, there probably are a hundred or so still standing today and furnishing quite adequate, if unusual, shelter for their owners.

Aside from their unconventional shape, perhaps the most curious thing about these houses was the fact that the craze for them was sparked not by an architect, but by a New York City phrenologist, Orson Squire Fowler. For those who have forgotten or those who haven't heard about it, phrenology was once an extremely popular method of character analysis and voca-

Continued on page 4

MAY - JUNE 1998



CALENDAR OF EVENTS

MAY

- 4 Business Meeting, 7:30PM, Ely House
- 14 A History Lesson by the students of the East Windsor School District

JUNE

- 1 Business Meeting & Election of Officers, 7:30PM, Ely House

GERTRUDE APPEGET WYCKOFF MAXWELL

Continued from page 1

join the Colonial Dames; can you help me verify my claims?" I gave her a big book I had in the house, "History of the Bergen and Other Allied Settlers," and she found a foot-note with reference to our ancestor, his sons and services, and full reference to other sources of information. Mama's records were also of value.

I became very much interested in the research and in a leisure time journeyed to Albany and Washington in search of records which unfolded like a flower and established the claims of my niece beyond a peradventure. Later for sentimental reasons I visited the site of the early home in Flatlands, and saw the church, the successor of the block-shaped one, which was older than Trinity by three score years and more.

My father was fifth in direct line from Peter Claessen W. [Wyckoff], who with his father Claes Cornelissen landed on Manhattan in 1636. Peter was nine years old and grew and was closely identified with the history of his adopted country and the records are so clear and full we take him as the Founder of the family in America.

My father was doubly a Hollander for his mother was in the same family line and through her he was sixth in descent from Peter Claessen. His mother was known as the "girl who fed the enemy" in the time of the Revolutionary War, but it was an unwilling service she rendered. She was a big girl of thirteen when one day in 1777 a party of Tories rode up and demanded dinner. She lived on a farm near the town that Marion Harland called in a novel "Old Harbor." Her father was in the army, her mother absent with some of the stock they had secreted. Their silver was buried and so were a part of their provisions.

The girl parleyed with the Tories and told them if they would be quiet

and disturb no one in the house and make her a fire under a big iron pot out of doors she would give them the best dinner the house afforded. She got meat from the pork barrel, collected vegetables, made dumplings and in time put before them a fine pot-pie and the men were orderly and courteous and rode off with thanks.

Ten years later the girl married, without changing her name, the miller near Sweet Auburn, and settled there, and for some reason brought the big iron pot along with her. It served sometimes when there was a rush of mill work and extra hands, to cook dinner for, but eventually it stood unused in a shed and the children as they came along pointed to it as the pot grandmother cooked dinner in for the Tories! Nothing was made of the incident. It was just a matter of course. It was not until the Daughters of the Revolution Society was formed that we became alert on the doings of our forbears in that war.

My father Peter W. took over the mill on the death of his father, and his mother according to custom remained with the oldest son. The place was a center of industry. A saw-mill and tannery was added and business was brisk. The house was a characteristic Dutch house with a long sloping roof with kitchen and repair shops adjoining. One shop was kept for the shoemaker and the tailor who in turn shod and clothed the entire family. There was a jollity and merry making each generation, all the men played the fiddle and all sang. I have the music book with the queer "buck-wheat" notes!

In my Parents' family in 1842 were a daughter of twenty, three boys that were men in size, a younger sister and brother and the grandmother. Two little girls were in the church yard and I, the youngest, was in the family of my uncle and aunt as their adopted

daughter. My father had not been entirely well and planned to build a new house nearby and let the older boys manage the mills. Accordingly lumber had been seasoning so that cracks and settling would be avoided for that was the way houses were built in those days. It was a matter of two years that the new house was in building and it was a beautiful and roomy one.

The moving was a slow process as my mother wanted every room in order before possession. Meals had been snatched hurriedly and system dispensed with. All was finished on a Saturday night. On Sunday morning the breakfast was to bring the family together and order restored. My real mother, who was of a reflective mind, looked upon her assembled family and said, "We are all here. I wonder who will be the first to be taken away?" The grandmother immediately answered, "It will be Pete, I expect, he's always complainin'."

They all got ready and went to church, though they could reasonably have said they were tired. A room with special conveniences had been set aside for the grandmother which she was never to occupy, for she was stricken in the middle of the Dominie's sermon with apoplexy and died on the way home. I was two years old and in church for the first time. I sat in the gallery with Mammy Gin for Mama feared I might not behave well and our pew was a front one and near the pulpit. Mammy Gin and I were dropped at home and my adopted parents hurried on to the mill to find the family just entering the house with the body of the grandmother.

It seemed a sad inauguration of life in the new abode. But the grandmother had almost reached four score years. She had seen all her eight children married and comfortably settled and all

GERTRUDE APPELEGET WYCKOFF MAXWELL

with families except her youngest daughter, my adopted mother. She had seen all her thirty-eight grandchildren but the two youngest and all of them were living but the two little girls in the church yard, and she passed directly from the Sabbath observances she loved so well on earth to "where congrega-

tions ne'er break up nor Sabbaths have an end".

[A complete history of the founder of the family was written and read at a meeting of the Wyckoff Clans in 1908 and is on record.]

[To be continued]

President's Message

It seems that whenever the Society has needs, someone always comes forward to fill the void. Our shelf space in the Manuscript Library and the cellar has been woefully lacking and it has been a frustration to both our museum and library committees who are trying to preserve our historical items. I was fortunate to be at a meeting with a good friend and businessman, Ron Longo of Diversified Rack & Shelving, Rt #130, East Windsor. I mentioned our problem and asked if he might be of any help. Ron immediately came to Ely House and drew up a plan. Since that meeting, he has donated all of the shelving and the time of his installation crew to set us up and completely fulfilling our shelving needs. The Longo family went to Hightstown High School and have a sense of community spirit. I would like to personally thank Ron and Diversified Rack & Shelving for helping us out.

Our last meeting at Meadow Lakes was one of our best attended in some time. Dr. Arthur Shapiro of the Roosevelt Historical Society did a great job and was well received by all who attended. It was great to see a good turn out of some of our members we haven't seen for a while. Our Meadow Lakes folks appear to enjoy visiting with us "townies". Thanks to Ed Thomas for having thought of inviting the Roosevelt Historical Society to join us for the meeting. Many stories went about the room about Eleanor Roosevelt and Dr. Einstein visiting the Roosevelt community. After the program, one of our Meadow Lakes friends talked of his working with Albert Einstein.

With the early spring upon us, we should all be grateful to Shirley Olsen and our friends in the Rocky Brook Garden Club. The spring flowers and bulbs are blooming nicely as we continue improve upon our landscaping. Thank you volunteers.

Cappy Stults tells me that he will be ready for our meeting to nominate our next year's officers and has indicated that several members have stepped forward to serve. If you would like to serve our Society in any capacity, just let one of our officers know. Volunteerism is what we are all about.

HIGHTSTOWN EAST WINDSOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

founded 1971

Serving Hightstown Borough
and East Windsor Township
609-371-9580

Officers for 1997-98

- Dr. Harold C. Cox President
448-0037
- Dr. Edgar Thomas, Jr. Vice-President
- Shirley Olsen Recording Secretary
- Lois Groendyke Corres Secretary
- Frank Brennan, Jr. Treasurer

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- Shirley Olsen Grounds
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- Kate Middleton Library
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- Richard Hutchinson Newsletter
302-875-4976
- Dr. Edgar Thomas, Jr. Program
448-3533
- Peggy Brennan Publications
395-7958
- Bud Perrine Property
448-1376
- Jackie Hart & Robin Smith Museum

Building Committee

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ORPHA GIBERSON'S WISH WAS NOT FULFILLED

by Richard S. Hutchinson

As I have told the reader previously, there are certain given names of people which have fascinated me and have caused me to become interested in that person's personal history. One of those persons encountered during my research of the families in the Hightstown-East Windsor Township area was Orpha Giberson. I first found her in the early census records of the area. I have never encountered anyone with the name of "Orpha" during any of my research other than that of Orpha Giberson. And, as research as shown, she was really a unique person to go with the unique name.

As you have read the previous chapters of Gertrude Maxwell's life in Hightstown, we have met and found out a little more about Orpha. I have introduced you to as much information as could be found on her without spending an inordinate amount of research time on it. It was last mentioned that Orpha, the sexton of the Hightstown Baptist Church Cemetery, had slept with her gravestone at the foot of her bed in the little shack that once stood toward the rear of the Baptist church. The reason for the tombstone by her bed was to make sure that her grave would be properly marked. At the time of her death, there were tributes to her in the *Gazette* and by the Baptist church's history. I had also commented that I was sure that Orpha would have had something to say about the cemetery having been paved over, which I had assumed included her own gravestone, especially since she was so concerned that her burial place be properly marked including the fact that the church, its cemetery, and its history had meant so much to her during her life. And, after leaving Orpha in the previous chapters, I thought that her name would not surface again. However, after doing some additional research, I have found that not only was her gravestone taken from her grave, but during the parking lot paving process her final resting place, along with those of several others, was also destroyed during

another church construction project in 1969.

In Edward J. Raser's history of the Hightstown Baptist Church Cemetery written for *The Genealogical Magazine of New Jersey*, he states that after the church moved from Cranbury to Hightstown in 1785, "a new graveyard was established behind the Hightstown meeting house Burials ... increased rapidly after 1800 and continued for a high rate for over fifty years By 1870 the graveyard was essentially full, and about 1880 it was voted to permit no more interments. The burials occurring after 1880 were probably allowed to permit interments alongside previously buried family members." In March 1900 a church committee reported that it had inspected and found the cemetery at the old church's location in Cranbury to be in very bad condition. The church then sold the Cranbury cemetery for \$300 to J.S. Silver & Bro. having "removed the Graves to Hightstown Baptist Grave Yard...." (Board of Trustees Minutes, June 1890-Jan. 1910, pp 282,289)

Raser continues that by 1925 "pressure to modernize the church facilities at Hightstown resulted in proposals to replace the 1834 brick structure ... and to remove the eyesore posed by the graveyard. Over the years the graveyard had badly deteriorated and become a maintenance problem, and since few of the current church members had any close connection with persons buried there, the proposal to level the burial ground met with little dissent Soon afterwards the 1834 building and the graveyard were destroyed."

It wasn't until 1969, that the church's destroyed cemetery came back into the forefront of the history of Hightstown. In August of that year, the church began construction to extend the rear of the church's Christian Education building which meant digging toward the location of the previous cemetery. Raser continues that during

this construction, the contractor working on the project "encountered headstones piled on top of each other, and some human remains." The work on the project was halted by this discovery and everyone headed to court. The work did not continue until September 25th of that year after the Mercer County court issued an order to allow for the relocation of the human remains uncovered during the construction. Raser reports that "Church officials judged the remains to be those of Ann Allen (died 1875), Nancy Chamberlin, Emerson Creque, Hettie K. Creque, Orpha Giberson, Addison Mount, Mary Elizabeth Mount (died 1843), Rebecca Mount (died 1841), Sarah Matilda Mount (died 1849), John Wyckoff Slack, Peter B. Slack and his wife Abigail Applegate, and Thomas Slack and his wife Rachel." The human remains unearthed were later buried together in the far rear of the church property under a bronze marker which read "Beneath this marker are buried the few unidentifiable remains of graves transferred from that portion of the old church burial grounds now occupied by the stair tower on the east side of Eaches Chapel. November 10, 1969." It was reported that among the stones uncovered in the pile of gravestones during the excavation for this building project were those of Rev. Peter Wilson, the second pastor of the church, who was born in Windsor Township on the 14th of May in 1753 and the lower half of the broken stone of Rev. John Seger, the third pastor of the church, who was born in New York on the 4th of February 1786.

So, it appears that Orpha's extreme measure of sleeping with her gravestone, so that her final resting place would be properly identified after her death, went for naught. For Orpha, now rests in an unmarked location. I am now convinced more than ever that Orpha Giberson, who had apparently feared this very type of thing happening to her, would have a great deal to say about her situation today.

OCTAGON

Continued from Page 1

tional guidance based on a study of the shape and protuberances of the human head.

Orson Fowler, a graduate of Amherst College in Massachusetts, was conducting a thriving business lecturing and writing books on this pseudo-science when, at the age of forty, he took up home designing as a sideline. Already an extremely popular writer, in 1848 he opened new worlds to his readers with a book setting forth very persuasively the alleged advantages of octagon-house living. He titled it *A Home for All, or a New, Cheap, Convenient, and Superior Mode of Building*. At about the same time he set an example for his followers by embarking on the construction of a huge four-story octagonal mansion at Fishkill, New York, incorporating his own advanced ideas.

Shortly thereafter, while on a lecture tour of Wisconsin, Fowler discovered another innovative builder, named Joseph Goodrich, who had constructed a house whose out side walls were formed of a mixture of water, lime, gravel and sand that hardened like rock and consequently was fireproof and ratproof. Fowler immediately applied this principle to his own Fishkill project, pouring a substance resembling concrete into wooden forms. Then in 1853, coincident with the completion of his house, he brought out a revised edition of his book with the updated title: *A Home for All, or the Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building*.

The "gravel wall" portion of Fowler's crusade attracted relatively few converts. Perhaps handling a heavy, sloshy mixture on a large scale was too difficult for the average do-it-yourselfer of the 1850's. But the eight-sided house, which Fowler claimed as his own invention, was a far different story; they were built in the East, in the Midwest and even in far-off San

Francisco. By the time the great man had moved into the Fishkill mansion that was to serve as headquarters for his phrenology lecturing and book publishing business, Fowler fans were busily building brick, stone and wooden octagons, using plans for various sized dwellings included in his books.

The main rooms in these far-out structures did not have peculiar shapes, as one might suppose, but usually were rectangular. Leftover triangular spaces became closets, kitchens, bathrooms and stair spaces. In the grander octagons, a circular stairway occupied the center of the house, extending from the ground floor to a glass-enclosed cupola on the roof, the latter a distinguishing feature of most Octagon houses.

In addition to plugging the gravel wall and the octagon shape of his book, author Fowler expounded on virtually every phase of home building. For example, he urged separate sleeping rooms for children. His advice which follows seems as good today as when he wrote it.

Sleeping by themselves is also a

first-rate plan for health, and to prevent their imbibing anything wrong from other children; nor are their slumbers disturbed by a restless bed-fellow. Nor do they keep each other awake nights, or in bed mornings, by talking. In fact, many most desirable ends does this plan subserve - at least enough to require its adoption by every parent who can afford it.

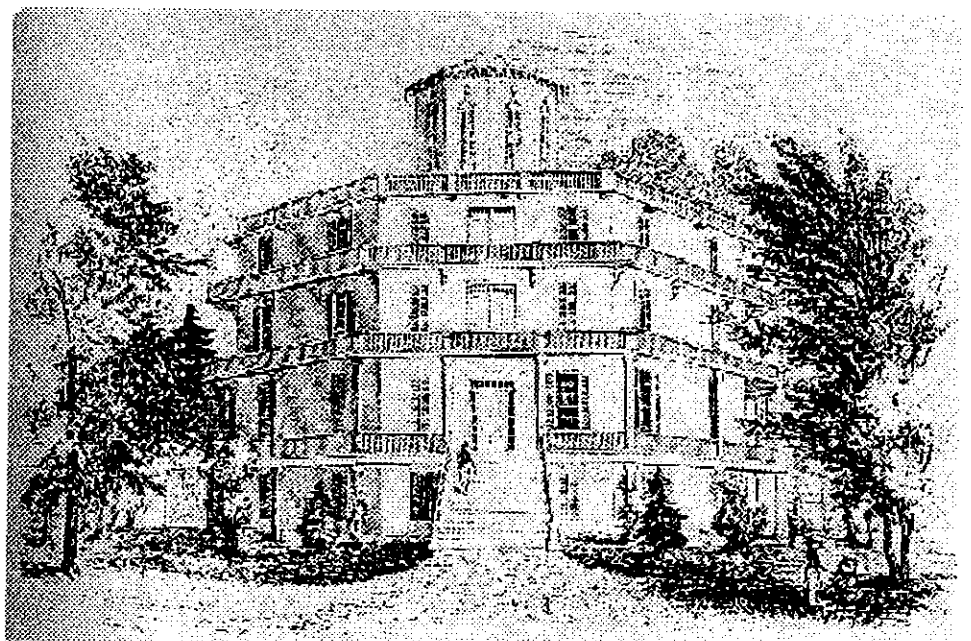
Where money was no problem, he had this suggestion for the home builder.

Most desirable, in every really good house, is a play-room for children, a gymnastic room for females, and a dancing room.

Fowler was all for compact houses, for both functional and aesthetic reasons.

Wings on houses are not quite in as good taste as on birds. How would a little apple or peach look stuck on each side of a large one? Yet winged

Continued on page 6



OCTAGON

Continued from page 4

houses are just as disjointed and out of taste.

At the end of his book Fowler conceded that some might not care for his "gravel wall" construction. So he offered an interesting substitute which he called "board wall" construction to contrast it with the usual method of framing a house with upright members, nailing clapboard on the outside and placing laths and plastering on the inside. He suggested having boards cut five and six inches wide and from one to two inches thick. Alternately, these were laid flat with the outside edge even, one on top of the other, and each nailed to the one beneath it. A good, solid wall, to be sure. But here was the real trick. With the alternating width of the boards, one ended up with horizontal grooves for anchoring the inside plaster, thus eliminating the expense of lathing.

Fowler's own solidly-built home at Fishkill, New York, has long since disappeared. After having several owners, it eventually became a run-down eyesore known locally as "Fowler's Folly" and, in 1897, on orders from the town fathers, was destroyed by a hefty charge of dynamite.

The majority of surviving octagon houses can be seen in the northeast and north central regions of the country, predominately in New England, New York, Ohio and Michigan. However, the fad, at its peak, found its way into more than twenty states as well as Canada.

Perhaps the most striking of these unusual buildings open to the public is the brick Richards' mansion built in 1856 at Watertown, Wisconsin, thirty-five miles west of Milwaukee. Owned

by the local historical society and on view from May through October, it has fifty-seven rooms (if one counts the closets and halls) and a spiral center staircase.

Just for the record, the famous red brick Octagon House in Washington, D.C., at the corner of New York Avenue and 18th Street, N.W., is not an octagon at all, but an elongated hexagon with a rounded front. Ages ago somebody unsure of his geometric forms dubbed it an octagon and the label stuck. Long headquarters of the American Institute of Architects, the building, dating from 1800, became a national historic shrine in 1970.



HIGHTSTOWN-EAST WINDSOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Jan 5	Monday	7:30PM	Business Meeting, Ely House
Jan 18	Sunday	1:30PM	Annual Dinner, Coach & Four Restaurant
Feb 2	Monday	7:30PM	Business Meeting, Ely House
Feb 12	Thursday	7:30PM	Video of East Windsor Historic Sites by Dr. Thomas, Meadow Lakes
Mar 2	Monday	7:30PM	Business Meeting, Ely House
Mar 24	Tuesday	7:30PM	History of Roosevelt by Art Shapiro, Meadow Lakes
Apr 6	Monday	7:30PM	Business Meeting, Ely House
Apr 16	Thursday	7:30PM	East Windsor History by Kate Middleton, Ely House
May 4	Monday	7:30PM	Business Meeting, Ely House
May 14	Thursday	7:30PM	A History Lesson by the students of the East Windsor School District
Jun 1	Monday	7:30PM	Business Meeting & Election of Officers, Ely House

1998 Calendar

SOCIETY ACQUISITIONS

1. 1998-10 - Bound copy of *The Village Record*, 30 June 1849-June 1851. Gift of Stan & Gwen Holmes, Macungie, PA.
2. 1998-11 - Dorothea Reed Pullen's copy of the flag she designed for Mercer County. Gift of Dorothea Reed Pullen.
3. 1998-12 - Photographs (ca. 1920-55) and correspondence from Dr. Wm. L. Wilbur family, 156 Stockton St, including photographs of Mrs. Wilbur's childhood home in Collier's Mill & the Collier's Mill general store (ca. 1880); ad for Dr. Wilbur's 19 October 1900 lecture in Hightstown; various menus and railroad memorabilia from 1870-1878; booklets, deposit cards, NJ & NY postcards, Zion War Orphanage envelopes, flyers, stamp-books; telegram to Jacob Sherman from Pioneer Women's Organization for Palestine; letters from the front in France in WWII from "Alf" to "Bernie 'n Rosie"; Rees Family correspondence. Gift of Leila Wishart.
4. 1998-13 - Hightstown photographs of Mary Winarski at her 147 Main Grocery, 1935; HHS Class of 1931; Acme Tea Co, Stockton St, ca. 1920; Mr. Hiland in jewelry store, ca. 1910; G.C. Fields' garage, ca. 1925; Cottrell's show room, 15 August 1930. Gift of Betty Lou (Hutchinson) Field.
5. 1998-14 - Hightstown Police Department news book of clippings and photographs, 1969-1986; scrapbook of photographs of Hightstown Police; 1974 calendar poster with pictures of Hightstown Police Department; film of Hightstown Walking Tour, 2 reels, undated. Gift of Mrs. Lawrence W. Archer, Florida.



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a member!**

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1998 Annual Membership Application (January - December)

Individual Family Student

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Home Phone Number: _____

Please mail the completed application, along with a check made payable to the Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society to:

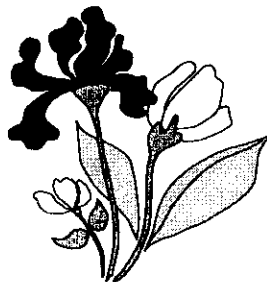
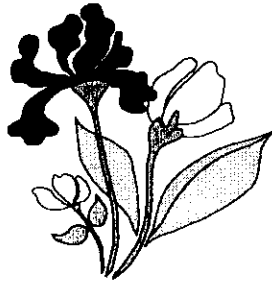
Membership Committee
Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society
164 North Main Street
Hightstown, NJ 08520

*For first class delivery, please add \$2.00 to subscription price.

Here we have a well dressed individual who had his picture taken in New York City, New York, ca. 1850. He might be what one would call a "dandy".



This photo is from the HEW Historical Society's collection and is found in an album containing the photos of the Augustus Walling family from this area. Can't you see him walking down the main street of the Village of Hightstown?



**Hightstown-East Windsor
Historical Society**
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