

HIGHTSTOWN
NEW



EAST WINDSOR
JERSEY

Historical Society News

JUNE 2009

George F. Dennis' World War II Writings

by Dr. David Martin (April, 2009)

I used to enjoy stopping by the *Hightstown Gazette* office to chat with the paper's long time owner and publisher, Kathryn Dennis, about the town's history and people. As many members of the historical society know, Kathryn had strong feelings about any number of topics and was not hesitant to express herself openly and bluntly. She in turn especially enjoyed telling me of her relationships with the Peddie School, where I have worked since 1975, especially about the old days when she used to take voice lessons there. She would often call me up to see what was going on at Peddie, or to ask about a Latin word derivation (I teach Latin), or to verify some detail about the town's history for an article she was working on. She also took quite an interest in my son, Peter, from the days when he, still a toddler, was "helping" a group of Peddie students and volunteers from town to excavate the line of railroad sleepers from the old Camden and Amboy railroad line that ran across Rogers Avenue next to the *Gazette* parking lot.

Kathryn told me often how proud she was of her late brother George Foster Dennis and what a great writer he was. He was the shining light of the family and was destined to take over as publisher of the *Gazette* until he was killed in World War II, a tragedy from which the family never recovered. Since I was also a writer as well as co-owner of a small publishing company (Longstreet House, which Hightstown resident Doug Mariboe and I established in 1986), Kathryn used to ask me every so

often what it would take to get her brother's wartime letters published. I gave her some advice and we talked off and on about the project over the years, but we never did anything about it before she passed away on September 17, 2005, at the age of 90.

Consequently, I was surprised when Hightstown attorney, David Coates, contacted me in the summer of 2006 to let me know that Kathryn had left some money in her will to get her brother's letters edited and published. I was pleased (and honored) to be asked to take up the project. I started working on it that fall and finished writing in April, 2007. Actual layout and production of the small book, which was 209 pages in length, was aided significantly by Cathy Simmons of the Old Hights Print Shop. The book, entitled "Tossed Around": *The World War II Writings of Pfc. George Foster Dennis* was published by Longstreet House in the fall of 2007 in a limited run.

When I took up the project, I envisioned starting with a shoebox full of letters or a pile of manuscripts (many of us remember how Kathryn's office and home were so overstuffed with papers!). This was to be far from the case. I did locate about fifteen of George's personal letters to various family letters, but I could not find original copies of any of his more formal writings, the ones that Kathryn was so fond of. What I ended up doing was reading through all the copies of the *Gazette* from 1941 to 1945 to locate articles and letters

that George sent home from the army. It turned out that he wrote a regular weekly column about his military adventures. He called his column "Tossed Around" and developed it from a weekly sports column that he used to write before he went into the army (he even kept his column going when he was away at college at Syracuse University). All together, I transcribed around 60 letters from the *Gazette*, most of them by using the microfilm copies of the newspaper that are in the possession of the Hightstown Memorial Library and the Peddie School Archives. In places where the microfilm copy was illegible (or, in some cases, where newspaper issues had not been microfilmed) I referred to the actual surviving copies of the *Gazette* that are held in the collections of the Hightstown East Windsor Historical Society. (These original *Gazettes*, in bound volumes, were held by the Peddie School until the 1980s, when I became school Archivist after the passing of Carl Geiger, and arranged their transfer to the HEWHS.)

I literally started the project with Kathryn's obituary, since I knew next to nothing about the details of her family and history (she used to say that her personal life was nobody else's business!). The obituary led me to her family's burial plot in Glendola Cemetery in Wall Township, which is where her mother's family, the Sexsmiths, came from. Once I had some names and death dates, I was able to start researching through census reports and public

Continued on page 2

World War II Writings

,continued from page 1

birth and death registers at the New Jersey State Archives, which led me to more newspaper articles in Hightstown and Allentown, enabling me to flesh out the Dennis family history. I was also helped in my research by two boxes of material from Kathryn's house that were saved by Bob Patten and Arlene O'Rourke. This material contained a lot of family clippings and photographs, as well the handful of personal letters from George mentioned above, but no original copies of the letters and articles that appeared in the newspaper. They, sadly, must have been lost or destroyed.

The Dennis family, it turns out, had originated in Massachusetts in the 1640s. One branch headed out to California in 1850. There Frank Dennis married Ruth Walton, daughter of a well-to-do merchant from Ventura. Their son George Palmer Dennis was born in Ventura in 1877 and took up the newspaper trade. In 1904 he met May Sexsmith at the St. Louis Worlds Fair. They married in 1907 and moved to New Jersey in 1912, probably to be closer to May's family. George P. Dennis purchased the *Hightstown Gazette* in September 1912 and moved his growing family to Hightstown that December.

He was publisher of the *Gazette* until his death on July 15, 1955 at the age of 78. His wife May died on October 20, 1965, at the age of 85.

George P. and May Dennis had seven children: Dorothy, (1908-1997), who married Howard Williams (no children); Edward (1910-1973), who married Anna Scott and had a daughter, Edwina; Marjorie (1912-1942), who died of Hodgkins' disease; Kathryn Sexsmith Dennis (1915-2005); Elizabeth (1916-1993); Walton Palmer (1918-2002), who married Mary Werner and had two children, Debbie and George W.; and George Foster Dennis (1920-1944).

George F. Dennis, the youngest of the clan, was by all accounts the darling of the family. He was tall and bright and personable and was groomed to take over the paper. After graduating from Hightstown High School in 1937, he spent a post graduate year at the Peddie School and then attended Syracuse University, where he graduated magna cum laude in June, 1952 with a double degree in journalism and political science. After working briefly in a state government job, young George became sports editor of the *Gazette* and then helped his father manage the paper after his older brother Palmer joined the army in November 1942. He married Helen Nelson Storms of Allentown on May 28, 1943.

George's promising newspaper career was cut short by the war. He joined the army on August 3, 1943; he was probably drafted but I couldn't verify that. He left for training camp on the same train with George Dubell, who helped me with some of the background for my book. He was trained at Fort McClellan in Alabama from September 6, 1943, to January 4, 1944, when he was sent to Fort Meade, Maryland for advanced training. There he was assigned to Company D, 8th Battalion, 2nd Replacement Regiment. George was shipped overseas in February, 1944, and served first in North Africa. After being assigned to the famous 45th (Thunderbird) Division in March, 1944, he saw his first combat at Anzio in Italy. In May, 1944, he was transferred to 180th Regiment Headquarters Company as regimental historian and public relations specialist. His unit was attached to the 7th Army in June, 1944, and participated in the invasion of southern France on August 15, 1944. During the ensuing campaign his unit fell into a German ambush at Baume-les-Dames, France (near Toulons) on September 10, 1944. In this action, George was mortally wounded and he died in a German

Continued on page 5

HIGHTSTOWN EAST WINDSOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*Hightstown, New Jersey
founded 1971*

**To educate, while preserving for
future generations, our people
and our community's history.**

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Visit Working Grist Mill

by Jennifer Worringer, Reference Librarian (May 2009)

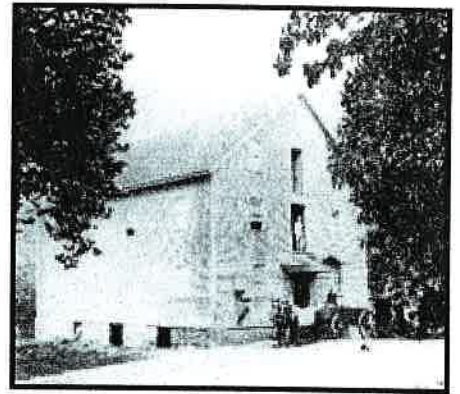
Just 14 miles away, there is an operating 19th century grist mill just like those needed to grind grains in Hightstown, Etra, and Imlaystown for over a hundred years. The Waln mill is part of a recently upgraded county park called Historic Walnford Park. It's just south of Allentown off Route 539.

Visitors are welcome to observe the grinding wheel all summer long. Up the spacious lawn from the mill on the creek is the family home built in 1772. It is open for tours and a Park Ranger is available to answer questions and tell the story of the Waln family.

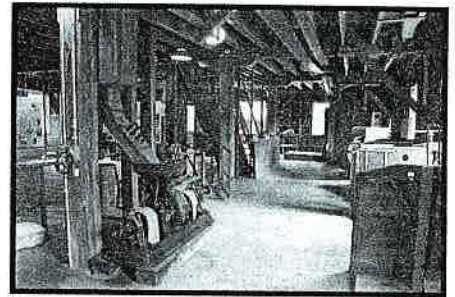
The Walns were a wealthy shipping family in Philadelphia. Initially, the Walns purchased fresh produce from New Jersey farmers and shipped it to other parts of America. One of the Waln businessmen realized he could improve his profits by growing his own produce. Thus, Walnford was built on Crosswicks Creek. The water was used to power the mill as well as transport the produce.

The 36 acre park includes an 1879 carriage house with a carriage, a corn crib, and several resident cats.

Remaining summer events include fiddling, weaving, July 4 and flour sack fashion. For more information, google the phrase "historic walnford." Or you may call (609) 259-6275.



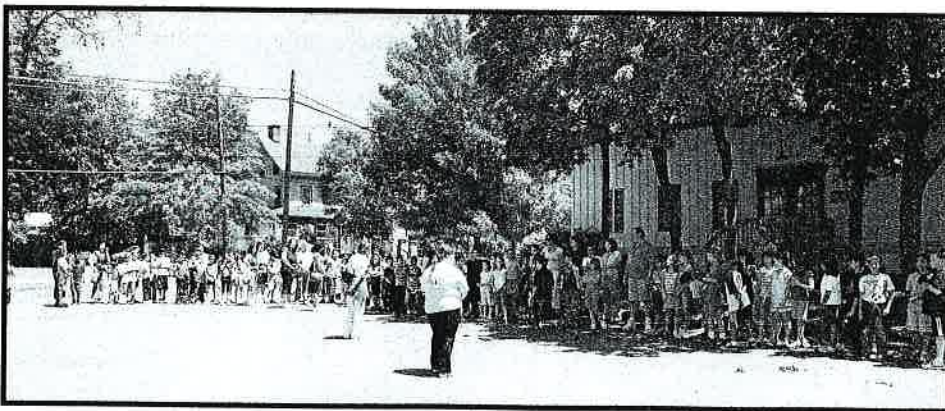
Waln's Mill, 1890



Interior View of the mill (date unknown)

Field Trip to Ely House

Third graders from Hightstown schools came to visit Ely House on Thursday, May 21, 2009. The photo below shows the children behind the freight station on Society property, learning about the sleepers that carried the John Bull train.



www.hewhs.org

Work Day!!

Work day at the Society is Monday, June 29, 2009 beginning at 10:00 a.m. inside the Ely House. The basement needs to be sorted out as well as our dress collection needs to be catalogued and stored properly in our new archival boxes.



Elsie the Cow

by Christian Kirkpatrick (March, 2009)

In March, Edith Perrine Sprague spoke to the Society about her experiences touring the country during the late 1940s with Elsie the Cow. The Borden Milk Company sent its mascot to Chicago and various places in the East Coast (including the Macy's in New York City and across the country including California and Texas) to raise money for war bonds. Mrs. Sprague and her sister accompanied the cow—sometimes on a private plane, sometimes in a box car. They groomed her, milked her, and generally oversaw her health. Anne and Edith traveled with Elsie for four years on The Flying Tiger Airline.

Everyday they prepared Elsie to appear in her “boudoir,” an elaborately feminine bedroom where she patiently rested. Elsie was very popular with children and earned over \$10,000,000 for the war effort.

There have been dozens of Elsie's, but perhaps none as well loved as this one. She is buried, with a small grave marker, in Plainsboro, New Jersey.



Anne and Edith Perrine holding Elsie the Cow and a calf at Wrigley Field, in Chicago in 1944. The calf was auctioned off for \$525,000.

Hightstown's 2009 Memorial Day Parade

Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society sponsored a float for Hightstown's 2009 Memorial Day Parade. The float is a creation that remembers local dairies that are now long gone. The centerpiece is a marvelous wooden dairy cow designed and painted by a local lady, Charli Lee, from East Windsor. Her father, Ron Lee, built this wonderful design and brought it to life, including shooting sprays of water onto the passing crowd. Janet Lee and Julie Ely came up with the float's idea and with the help of Dylan Lee, Sadie Lee, Amy Wham, Jonathan Ely & Ryan Ely were able to present this symbol of local history.

The float was entered in Cranbury's Memorial Day Parade Contest and won the best float prize to the surprise of it's creators. Sadie and Amy even ran up to the porch of The Elms, in Cranbury, to make sure the residence got some candy.



Sadie Lee and Amy Wham



Dylan Lee, and Julie Ely's sons - Jonathan Ely and Ryan Ely



World War II Writings ,continued from page 2

tally wounded and he died in a German hospital the next day. However, he was officially listed as "missing" until April, 1945, when the family was officially notified of his death, which was verified by captured German records. His body, once it was located, was moved a couple times before his father requested in 1949 that it be brought home. George Foster Dennis was laid to rest in his family's plot in Glendola Cemetery in Wall Township on October 29, 1949. (I was fortunately able to obtain a large file from the army containing the details of George's death and burial records.)

George's regular letters to the *Gazette* were very well written and showed his love of life and his keen eye for detail. During the months that he was in training camp, he usually composed his letters on Sunday nights; most were around 2000 words long. The letters were more irregular, understandably so, once he went to the front. His reactions to training camp exercises are quite interesting to read, as are his fondnesses for food (beer, steak and chocolate were

preferred) and his thirst for news from home. He wrote movingly of his first combat experience at Anzio and was strongly affected by the poverty and farming conditions he saw in Italy. He much preferred the people and culture of southern France. A sample of his writing will appear in the next issue of *Historical Society News*. It is entitled "France from a Hill Top." It was written on August 31, 1944, twelve days before he died on September 11, and was published in the *Gazette* on September 28, 1944.

Dr. David Martin is past President of the HEWS, and has also served as the organization's Treasurer and Library Committee head. He is Head of the Language Department and Archivist at the Peddie School in Hightstown and resides in nearby Twin Rivers. Copies of "Tossed Around": *The World War II Writings of Pfc. George Foster Dennis* are available for \$25 (\$30 postpaid) from Longsteet House, PO Box 730, Hightstown, NJ. 08520.

Hightstown Currency



Chris Gould presented a wonderful program about currency in Hightstown on April 26, 2009. In the photo above, Chris is holding several samples of Hightstown currency: a \$2 bill from 1855; a \$5 bill from 1882 and a \$5 bill from 1929. This is part of a collection owned by Warren and Shirley Olsen.

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Name: _____

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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

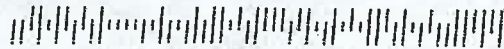
Women's Club House Tour

A Christmas Candlelight House Tour, sponsored by the Hightstown Woman's Club, will follow the traditional Society Christmas Tea on Sunday, December 13, 2009, from 3 to 6 p.m.

The tour will begin at Ely House, where tickets will be sold for \$15 (presale price of \$10). Ely House will be decorated for the holidays, and homemade cookies and punch will be served from the dining room to all guests going on tour, as well as to those just attending the annual tea. Eight local homes will be showcased, including the farm house of Ronnie and Janet Lee of Lee's Turkey farm. (The Lee's were thrilled to have their home open for the Christmas season, since the farm is not as busy during the holidays.)

No house histories will be provided to owners of featured homes, as is customary at our Society house tour. The next Society tour is scheduled for the fall of 2010.

The Society is happy to partner with the Hightstown Woman's Club for this event. The Club has donated generously to the Society for many years, and for the past three years its members have served as docents, helping keep the museum open for visitors.



Mrs. And Mrs. Robert Craig
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