

The VHS “Outdoor Museum”

By Jean Luddy

The collection of an historical museum contains more than the usual paper artifacts, art, documents and photographs. The past speaks to us through many types of objects. Over the years, the collection in the Vernon Historical Society’s Museum has grown through the generous donations of members of the community who appreciate local history. In addition to the materials housed within the Society’s building, a number of objects and plantings have been placed on the grounds of our home, the historic Vernon Grange. Several of these items relate to our local history. Others honor members of the community who have supported the mission of the Society or who were active in civic or social organizations in our town. The items from this special collection enhance the grounds.



The large bell that occupies a prominent place in front of the VHS building originally hung in the steeple of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Rockville. The bell was given to the church by Cyrus White and Lewis Corbin in 1883. During the late 1960s, the church left its building in Rockville (now the Senior Center) and moved to its present location on Grove Street. The bell ended up at Rockville High School where it served as a “spirit bell.” The bell was installed at the rear of the school near the football field. When the RHS football team scored a touchdown, the bell was rung in celebration. As time went by, the bell became a target for vandals, including some from opposing teams. A protective fence with a roof was built around the bell. A rope was threaded through the fencing so that the bell could still be rung. Eventually school administration decided that the bell had become a nuisance. When the Society moved to the Grange Building in 1987, school officials offered the bell to the Society. The bell can now be seen and appreciated.

A smaller bell sits at the back of the property surrounded by Myrtle’s Garden. This bell was cast in 1834 and placed in a mill building in Kelloggville. The mill was later acquired by the Talcott Brothers when they purchased the town and its buildings. The bell was donated to the Society by Al Cavedon, the former owner of the Aldon Spinning Mills Company, one of the last companies to use the mill in Talcottville for industrial purposes. In 2008, a framework to hold the bell was designed by engineer Roger Pelletier and constructed by welder Mel Parrett.



Several trees in the “Outdoor Museum” commemorate people and events as well as add shade and beauty to the property. In the early 1990s in honor of Earth Day, a local women’s community group donated a cherry tree which was planted in front of the Grange building. In the late 1990s, a white oak seedling was given to the Society as part of a state-wide program commemorating an anniversary of Connecticut’s famous Charter Oak. Many towns were given seedlings to remember the story of the colonial charter which was hidden inside of a white oak tree to prevent the British government from taking the document.





The Shademaster Locust tree beside the parking area was donated in 1992 by friends of Norman and Geraldine Strong in honor of their 50th wedding anniversary. Mr. Strong, a lifelong farmer and an active member of community and civic organizations in town, requested this type of locust tree. In the fall, the tree does not produce any seed pods and the tiny leaves don't require raking.

On the other side of the driveway near the large bell, a Cleveland Pear tree stands in remembrance of Dr. Howard G. Abbott. Dr. Abbott, a prominent orthopedic surgeon, had his practice in Rockville. He volunteered on several committees

involved with improving services at Rockville Hospital. The tree was given in his memory by his wife, our Museum Director, Dr. S. Ardis Abbott.



Myrtle's Garden, which grows more beautiful each year, was established in 2008 in memory of Myrtle Loftus, a dedicated volunteer and lifelong resident of Rockville.



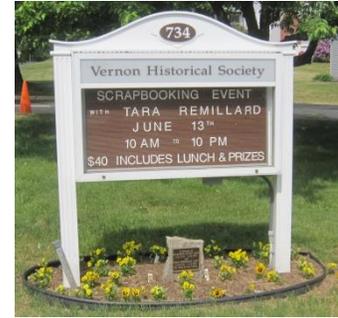
The white rose bushes in the arbor adjoining the garden came from Myrtle's home garden as did the cat statue. "Puff" sits in the garden on a rock resembling a pillow which was contributed by Charles Blouin. The two small stones underneath were cobblestones on Market Street in Rockville. When Market Street was torn up during urban renewal in 1965, Raymond Hany saved them.



Behind the garden, two large stones lie in a "V" formation. These stones originally served as the entrance steps for a tavern along the Tolland Turnpike (Route 30) during the early 1800s when stagecoaches took travelers from Hartford to Tolland. When the old tavern was demolished in the early 1900s, Dr. Oliver J. Purnell moved the stones to his property. In 2009, his son Judge James Purnell donated them to the Society. The rhododendron positioned between the stones came from Doris Bixby's home at 7 Orchard Street. Mrs. Bixby lived in the house which was originally built for the Superintendent of the Hockanum Mills in the 1870s. Her father, Frederick Schlaf, was the last Superintendent before the mill closed in 1934.



An illuminated sign and message board is the newest addition to the “Outside Museum.” Donated by Fred and Cheri Arzt, the sign honors the memory of Marjorie Little Arzt and Paul Frederick Arzt. Both came from long time Rockville families. Paul Arzt’s outstanding academic record and public service led to his being included in the Rockville High School “Wall of Honor.” Marjorie Arzt volunteered for several community and social organizations.



All of the objects and plantings profiled above not only beautify the grounds of the museum, but they remind us of stories from local history or commemorate people who have made positive contributions to our town.