

BRIDGEWATER HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Oct 2026

Issue No. Thirty



circa. 1911

Monthly meetings

held last Tuesday
of each month at 6:30 p.m.
Old Brick School House
12 North Bridgewater Road
Bridgewater, VT 05034
www.bridgewaterhistory.org

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-From the President

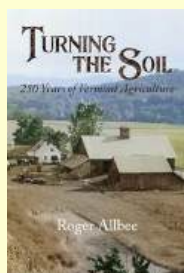
-“Awaiting the Apocalypse”
Bridgewater’s Second
Advent Church

-Storytelling at BHS

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Program:

Sunday, October 18th at
2:00 pm at the
Bridgewater Grange:
Roger Allbee, author and
former Vermont Secretary
of Agriculture will present a
program “Turning the Soil:
250 Years of Vermont
Agriculture”.



A winter storm Bridgewater Center Oak Chapel, 1950

From the President

With the closing of the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, the Historical Society can be proud of our work in documenting the evolvement of this community. Bridgewater was settled by veterans of the Revolution, and the collection of their stories and photographs of the headstones illustrate Bridgewater's part in the Westward settlement of New England.

In 1785, with the establishment of a sawmill, and then a grist mill, Richard Southgate established what would evolve into the Bridgewater Woolen Company. Thus, for 188 years, the Mill was the driving force, creating jobs and a busy community. Baseball teams, home grown plays and raft races became part of the fabric. It is easy to assume that we will all inherit the stories by osmosis, and the history will live on. However, that is generally not the case. Therefore, BHS decided to host an afternoon of storytelling, open to anyone to reminisce or just get together to remember lost tales and tidbits. This first event was centered on the Woolen Mill Drugstore and those who worked there. Karole Thompson Messier and Alice Paglia provided stories and artifacts. Rhonda White, Althea Derstine and Sue Kancir hosted. It is hoped that the event can be repeated.

Elisha Lee researched the history of the Oak Chapel, how it evolved and how it was the center of life for many in "Briggs", as Bridgewater Center was known. This Story is another example of a community within the community of Bridgewater and how it evolved.

Howard Coffin opened the season to a full house with his program "The Other Grant". Always a crowd pleaser we are looking forward to having him back next year.

Together with the Woodstock History Center, we co-hosted a 'community' of Zadock Thompson fans and family at the Grange. Kevin Graffagnino created a 'community' of historians that afternoon by encouraging the audience's appreciation of history and the part we play in preserving Vermont's history as well as Bridgewater's. Our speakers have showed us the bigger picture and how this small town and its stories fit into the history of the State and Country as a whole.



Jennie Shurtleff, Kevin Graffagnino, Polly Timken



Next year is the 100th anniversary of the 1927 flood. We are planning for speakers and an exhibit commemorating the recovery from the disaster. BHS is producing a calendar of photos taken at the time. It will be for sale locally.

Our annual meeting will be on Sunday October 18, at 2:00 PM at the Grange. This will be a brief meeting and then Roger Allbee will speak on his book "Turning the Soil: 250 Years of Vermont Agriculture". Refreshments will be served and a video of the event will be available on our web site, <https://bridgewaterhistory.org/>.

We are very much looking forward to seeing our members and guests next season,
Polly Timken
President

“Awaiting the Apocalypse”

Bridgewater's Second Advent Church

By Elisha Lee

<https://curiouslyyankee.substack.com/>

Some buildings announce themselves, telling their story at a glance, while others stand quietly, inviting us to figure them out on our own. I've driven and walked past the Oak Chapel in Bridgewater Center, Vermont, for at least five decades, recognizing it as a church, but giving it little more thought. The little white building deserves a closer look.

Bridgewater has only three churches. In addition to the Oak Chapel, built in 1868, there's a Congregational Church on Route 4, built in 1879, and a Mennonite Church on Route 100A, converted from an historic mid 19th-century home in 1952. The lack of churches doesn't reflect a lack of faith – there was a healthy population of Congregationalists, Baptists, and Methodists, but it was easier for farmers to attend services in nearby homes and schoolhouses than to make the often lengthy trips to town.



The Oak Chapel in Bridgewater Center Photo by Elisha Lee



Portrait of William Miller (Ellen G. White Estate)

Vermonters of the 19th Century took their faith seriously. The religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening (1790-1840) produced a number of charismatic evangelists with their own interpretations of the Scriptures, some of whom attracted regional, and occasionally even national, interest. One, William Miller, had a significant following here in Bridgewater. Born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in 1782, Miller had settled in Poultney, Vermont, by 1803. Initially abandoning his family's Baptist roots in favor of Deism (the recognition of God's existence without acceptance of the supernatural), a near miss by a British cannonball at the Battle of Plattsburgh led him to reconsider his belief in a detached divinity. Rigorous scriptural study led him to believe that Christ's return to earth, the Second Advent, had been prophesied quite precisely in the Old Testament's Book of Daniel: "And he said unto me, Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed." ¹

The Second Advent, of course, is Judgment Day, when Christ will return to earth and resurrect both the living and the dead, with the righteous rising to join Him in heaven, and the wicked cast into the fires of eternal damnation. The basis for his theological prognostications is complicated, but Miller became convinced that the Second Advent would occur sometime in 1843 or 1844. Sharing the word as a traveling preacher, he took his message to pulpits and camp meetings throughout New England and Eastern Canada, attracting a significant following that included Millerite newspapers Signs of the Times and The Advent Herald.



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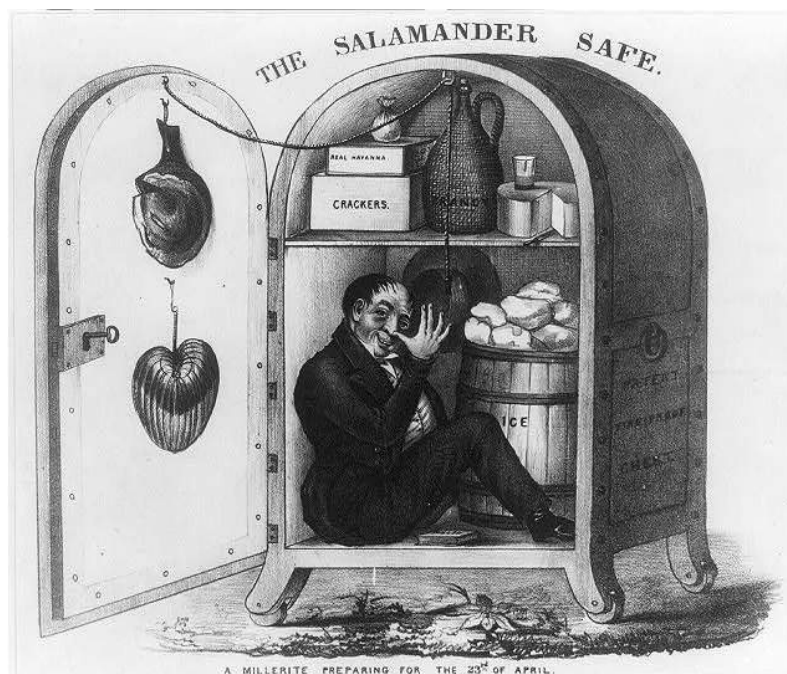
“Awaiting the Apocalypse”

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An 1892 story in *The Vermont Standard* reported: *There were many in Bridgewater and the neighboring towns, who believed that the second coming of Christ would occur on the 15th of November 1843, and meetings were held in the Mendell district, at the village and at the Center, sometimes at private residences, and often in the open air. The churches were opened to them in some places at first, but usually they did not agree.* [2](#)

They most certainly did not agree. Miller's followers were viewed with considerable skepticism by both their mainstream Christian brethren and the press. On March 28, 1840, Montpelier's *Green Mountain Evangelist and Universalist Watchman* wryly observed: *We could name individuals who contend strongly that the day of judgment is at hand, who have just completed very elegant and durable dwelling houses. They appear just as anxious to accumulate property as ever, and to hold on to their real estate.* [3](#)

A Philadelphia printer, Thomas Sinclair, produced the satirical image below, showing a Millerite preparing for the Second Coming by hiding in a fireproof safe (salamanders were believed able to survive fire) with a liberal supply of food, brandy, and cigars.



“The Salamander Safe” by Thomas Sinclair - 1843 (Library of Congress)

Millerites supposedly had special white garments known as “Ascension Robes” to wear on the Advent, but this may have been a myth invented by an irreverent reporter. What is indisputable is that they gathered on October 22, 1844, on rooftops and in open spaces, and, when that day proved no different than any other, it became known as The Great Disappointment. Profoundly disillusioned, some returned to their mainstream beliefs, while a second group theorized that the prophecy itself was sound, but the calculations had (obviously) been wrong. At the Albany Convention of 1845, Miller's followers struggled unsuccessfully to reorganize and redefine the movement, which ultimately fragmented into Seventh-day Adventist, Evangelical Adventist, and Advent Christian denominations. Bridgewater's Millerites followed the third path, continuing to meet and hold services at the District 8 school in Bridgewater Center until 1868, when they built a church of their own.

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“Awaiting the Apocalypse”

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Known as the Oak Chapel because of the acorn atop the cupola (possibly symbolic of spiritual growth), the church was probably built by William Comyn Bugbee, a member of their congregation, and later the builder of the town's Congregational Church. “The Great Disappointment” seems to have done little to deter their faith in Christ's imminent return, as, even in the 1890s, sermons were dire warnings of hellfire and brimstone. Everett V. Perkins, son of one of the Society's founders, reminisced at a reunion in the early 1930s, telling friends and family of Elder Herman Gustavus Davis, who preached three times on Sunday: morning, afternoon, and evening, with a Sunday School taught by Mrs. Davis between the afternoon and evening services. Members of the congregation typically attended all three.



Bridgewater Center looking north toward the Oak Chapel, circa 1910

Perkins said of Elder Davis: *It was his duty to proclaim the Gospel message, especially to warn the people to prepare for the Second Coming of the Lord. He said that he thought that Christ would return about 1894. As a small boy I wondered if my colt would get old enough to break before the end of the world came. Well do I remember the fear that would overwhelm me when Elder Davis would read a passage like the first verse of the last chapter of the Old Testament: “For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble; and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.”* [4](#)

Perkins' memories weren't wholly terrifying. He writes lovingly of the sound of hymns coming through the windows of the church and filling the valley, and of a congregation and community tightly bound by kinship and geography. At the time of its incorporation in 1886, the Advent Christian Society of Bridgewater numbered roughly 100 people. Baptism was done by immersion in the North Branch, even in the dead of winter, and spectators are said to have climbed on the roof of what was then the covered bridge beside the chapel, adding commentary such as “dip him again – he needs it!” [5](#)



Oak Chapel Reunion circa 1900 (Bridgewater Historical Society)

By 1911, many of the founding members had died and, as often happened in Vermont farming communities, their families were scattered across the country. With its membership dwindling to 40, the Society formally disbanded. Its former members continued to run a Sunday school and to hold services in the church whenever preachers could be obtained. They also held annual reunions with picnics and the singing of their old hymns well into the 1970s.

Between 1954 and 1970, the Oak Chapel was home to an Assemblies of God church, followed by the Church of Christ from 1971 to 1975. Today, it's home to a small non-denominational congregation – an aging outpost of community in a town being repopulated by people whose families aren't buried up the road in Baker Hill Cemetery.

Perhaps the question that the little white church on Bridgewater Center Road asks of us today isn't what, or even if we believe, but how much community is left here and elsewhere in Vermont, and what will hold us together in an increasingly disconnected society?

Storytelling at BHS

By Karole Thompson-Messier

Eleven Bridgewater and former Bridgewater residents met at the Bridgewater Historical Society on June 27, 2026, to share memories of the Bridgewater Drug Store, which in its day had served as a hub for the community. The Vermont Native Industries Showroom was adjacent to the Drug Store. It was where buyers would come to pick out a pattern and the woolen material for their garment of choice. They would be measured and fitted, the material would be sent to the cutting room and then upstairs to the ladies in the sewing room. Once finished the garment would be mailed out by Stimmy Needham to the client. The Bridgewater woolen mill across the street, holds the distinction of being the oldest wood-frame mill structure remaining in the State of Vermont.

Alice Paglia began the storytelling by detailing her many memories of the Drug Store. Karole Thompson-Messier recalled her memories from the 1940s when her mother Ruthie Carpenter-Thompson managed the Drug Store. Karole introduced a sketch of how the Drug Store looked in the 1940s. Rhonda Taylor-White added that Karole had left out the most important part of the Drug Store and that was the candy display. Also introduced was a gift item sold by the Drug Store. There was no pharmacy at the Drug Store. Prescriptions were filled in Woodstock, and a courier would deliver the filled prescription to the Bridgewater Drug Store. The prescriptions were held on a shelf in the backroom awaiting pickup.

The Showroom was built in 1925. This building is considered to be one of the finest examples of Tudor Revival in Vermont. The Post Office next door complimented this design but has since been torn down. Many famous people came to be measured and fitted for clothing. The photo shows the items fashioned by the employees of the Showroom. Lord and Taylor, the New York based department store, was a customer of Vermont Native Industries. The woolen material was used in their jackets made by Lord and Taylor. Some of the jackets made by Lord and Taylor were sold through the Showroom.



Linda Howe gave a nice overview of how the dye room worked. Tracy Templeton shared a great deal of information her dad, Gary Templeton, had sent to her. It was a fun filled and informative storytelling event. Following the storytelling, refreshments were served. Questions were raised and some who are reading this may have answers to the questions. For Example: What happened to the two glass topped tables used in the Drug Store or the large heavy glass marshmallow bowl on the counter? Does anyone remember Norman Rockwell stopping in for lunch on his way to visit his friend in Woodstock? If you have stories you would like to see preserved, please contact the BHS.



Curator's Corner

By Polly Timken

Every so often, volunteering and research can bring “Ah Ha!” moments. It’s the kind of thing that encourages us to keep doing what we do. Preserving Bridgewater’s history has been a journey started by others including Gladys Adams, who wrote “Bridgewater Vermont 1799-1976”, followed by Jeannette Sawyer, who envisioned and carried out the establishment of the Historical Society in 2010. This summer we have had just such a moment.



While preparing for an exhibit on “Earliest Days” in Bridgewater, I was laying out a copy of Zadock Thompson’s *Gazetteer of Vermont*, along with an engraving of Zadock and a copy of his 1832 “History of Vermont”. Next to this, I laid out some daguerreotypes and silhouettes from a collection that Ruth and Stillman Needham had donated. Many items have no labels but are part of the Bridgewater story. As I opened one daguerreotype, a very stern face looked out at me. I glanced to my left and it was the same face as the engraving. Dumb luck? Serendipitous? It was very satisfying to be able to put a name on the daguerreotype, as well as display it as the origin for the engraving.

We depend on team work here, so I asked another volunteer to decipher some of the Thompson genealogy for me. He was able to figure out that Stillman Needham was descended through his mother from Cromwell Thompson, Zadock Thompson’s brother. Thus, the mystery of how the daguerreotype might have ended up in the Needham family collection is solved.

The same volunteer was able to ask AI to replicate the image of the daguerreotype, as the original is cracked and hard to see. This makes it easier and safer to display.

Once again, BHS is not only indebted to families that pass their collective history on to us, but also to volunteers willing and able to use contemporary methods of research to benefit us.

Sources for: “Awaiting the Apocalypse”

1. The Holy Bible, King James Version (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Marketing, LLC, 2011), 426.
2. The Vermont Standard, September 29, 1892, 2.
3. The Universalist Watchman, March 28, 1840, 3.
4. Reminiscences of Everett V. Perkins, unpublished account in the collection of the Bridgewater Historical Society.
5. Gladys S. Adams, *Bridgewater Vermont 1779-1976* (Bridgewater: Bridgewater Cemetery Commission, 2005), 68.



Oak Chapel Services circa 1925 (Bridgewater Historical Society)

