

THE FRANCESTOWN HERITAGE MUSEUM



Newsletter

February 2018

The Winter Doldrums Issue

REJOICE - MUD SEASON IS ALMOST HERE

Not much happens at the Heritage Museum in winter. No heat being a significant factor. So we will use this opportunity to test your knowledge concerning your ancestors and their influence on things that affect you today.

THE THRESHOLD

Back in “the good old days” (way back) the first cabins (their houses) had dirt floors. Only the wealthy had floors other than dirt. Hence the saying “Dirt Poor”.

The wealthy often had floors of stone or slate and these could get very slippery in winter. To deal with this they often took the straw that remained after they threshed grain and spread this straw (a/k/a thresh) on the floor to absorb water and snow and help keep their footing. As winter wore on they would add more thresh. A point was reached that when the door was opened some of the thresh would work its way outside. Nothing, if not ingenious, our forefathers took to nailing a piece of wood to the floor across the doorway. This prevented the thresh from leaving the room and the term “Threshold” was born.

JUNE WEDDINGS

For some very ancient history let's look at the 1500's. The next time you are washing or bathing and are not happy with the water temperature, think back when most people took their yearly bath in May when the weather started to warm. This is reportedly a reason for so many June weddings as people still smelled pretty good come June. However, some degree of odor may well have again been setting in which is why brides carried bouquets (as they would hide the body odor). The custom remains today of carrying a bouquet when getting married.

A WARM BATH

More recently in the annals of bathing, baths consisted of a big tub filled with hot water. The man of the house had the privilege of going first when the water was clean and warm (no problem with sexism back then). He was followed by the sons and then by any other males in the household. The women next had their turn (still the same bath water mind you - which by now was now probably pretty discolored and no doubt a bit chillier). Next came the children and finally, the babies. It is said that by then the water was so dirty you could actually lose somebody in it. Hence the saying. “Don't throw the baby out with the bath water”.

THE THATCHED ROOF

Many old houses had thatched roofs (straw piled high, with no wood underneath). While moderately able to keep rain out of the house, they were an ideal place for animals to get warm. Mice, bugs, cats and other small animals lived in the roof. When it rained these roofs often became very slippery. The harder the rain, the more treacherous they became and the animals would begin to slip and fall off the roof. Giving rise to the saying “It’s raining cats and dogs”.

THE CANOPY BED

Small animals falling from the thatched roof was one thing, but they posed an even greater problem inside the house where bugs and other droppings would mess up your nice clean bed. Again, nothing, if not ingenious, our forefathers built beds with large, high bedposts and a bedsheet hung over the post offered some degree of protection. Hence the canopy bed was born.

Before continuing our test of your knowledge concerning your ancestors and their influence on things that affect you today, a word concerning the proposed expansion at the museum.

MAKING A SILK PURSE FROM A SOW’S EAR

A part of the museum mission is to help preserve items that were so much a part of our ancestors’ lives. The 1850 hand-drawn fire tub and 1849 stage coach were among the original items. To these were soon added both a summer and a winter hearse, a hay wain, several sleighs and buggies, and on it went. Soon we expanded beyond just items related to transport as local citizens started to donate items that reflected commerce, homemaking, agriculture and fire-fighting of those days. In the few years we have been open our number of displays has grown from 8 to over 175 and we have numerous offers of other artifacts. This embarrassment of riches is fantastic but – where are we going to put it all? Especially since we have the offers of additional items. The museum building has a lower level. It is currently little more than a large pile of sand.

A SOW’S EAR – The current unfinished lower level we are looking to expand into.



However, the building was constructed with the idea that someday this might be converted into an additional floor level. We have suggested that the day has come. If we hope to continue

offering the public a changing and expanding group of exhibits and preserving our town past we desperately need more room. A recent insurance survey suggested that the current arrangement is bordering on a safety hazard due to the congestion and narrow aisles.

Our fire fighters did an admirable job in moving this building here and re-erecting it on this site. They also had the foresight to make the foundation such that it would allow for this expansion. The museum has a small trust fund but not enough to fund such an undertaking. We secured some specifications from local architect Mike Petrovich, secured estimates for concrete, vapor barrier and electric lights and have consulted with Frankestown Sand and Gravel about the work. With all this interest in it we approached the Board of Selectmen (the museum is a town building) about this expansion. With estimates in hand a suggestion was made that if the museum was willing to expend a major portion of our trust fund, the town would seek to include the balance in an article to be included in this year's warrant at town meeting.

While the town's citizens have been more than generous with their donations of exhibit items we hope to prevail in a plea to vote in the affirmative on Article # 14 at this year's Town Meeting. A yes vote will allow us to take the above sow's ear and turn it into

A SILK PURSE - Additional space for exhibits such as currently found on the upper level.



Our thanks to everybody for their support since our opening and we look to continue making the museum a truly unique collection for a town our size. We hope you will support us with a yes vote on Article #14 at this year's town meeting.

So back to our test of your knowledge concerning your ancestors and their influence on things that affect you today.

THE COOKING KETTLE

In prior times, they cooked in the kitchen with a large kettle that always hung over the fire. Every day they lit the fire and added things to the pot - they ate mostly vegetables. They could eat the stew for dinner, leaving leftovers in the pot to get cold overnight and then start over the next day.

Repeating this meant that sometimes the pot had food in it that had been there quite a while. The rhyme that evolved is probably familiar to all:

“Peas porridge hot, peas porridge cold, peas porridge in the pot nine day old.”

Sometimes they could obtain pork, which made them feel quite special. When visitors came over, they would hang up their bacon to show off. The host would cut off a little to share with the guests and they would then all sit around and “chew the fat”. It was a sign of wealth if a man “could bring home the bacon”.

PEWTER DISHWARE

Pewter plates were used by those who had money. Food with a high acid content would cause some of the lead to leach into the food and lead to lead poisoning. This was common with tomatoes which have a very high acid content, so for hundreds of years or so, tomatoes were considered poisonous.

Pewter cups were used to drink ale or whiskey. The combination of the alcohol and lead would sometimes knock the imbiber out for a couple of days. When found they were taken for dead and prepared for burial. There are many tales of people being buried alive. To prevent this they took to laying the body out on the kitchen table for a couple of days and the family would gather around. They would eat and drink and wait to see if the “body” would awaken and the custom was born of “holding a wake”.

BACK IN MERRY OLDE ENGLAND

England is old and small. At some point they began to run out of places to bury people. They began to dig up old coffins and they would take the bones to a bone house and reuse the grave. In the course of reopening these old graves, many of the coffins were found to have scratch marks on the inside and they realized they had been burying people alive. No doubt this preceded the practice of “holding a wake” as described above. To prevent this from happening any more they would tie a string on the wrist of the corpse, lead it up through the coffin and ground and tie it to a bell. Someone would sit up in the graveyard all night to listen for the bell. This night duty became known as “the graveyard shift”. Thus the body could be “saved by the bell” and was considered a “dead ringer”.

And last but not least

URINE

Back in the day, they used urine to tan animal skins, so the family would all pee in a pot and once full it was taken and sold to the tannery.

If you had to do this to survive you were considered “piss poor”.

Those who were really destitute couldn’t even afford to buy the pot. They were considered to be the lowest of the low because they “didn’t have a pot to piss in”.

Now whoever said history was boring?