

THE FRANCESTOWN HERITAGE MUSEUM

Newsletter

Vol. 10, No. 2



February 2024

CONCEALMENT SHOES

SUPERSTITION

So, you do not believe in superstition and superstitious happenings? Well many of our ancestors apparently felt differently even if they did not admit it. Remember the Salem Witch Trials? So read on and we'll ask you the same question later on.

During a recent visit to the home of a Hollis Historical Society member we were shown an old shoe that had seen better days.



CONCEALMENT SHOE IN HOLLIS HOME

This shoe had just been found in her 1806 home by an electrician doing some work in the attic next to the chimney.

A bit later, when I was discussing this find with a Francestown resident, he said that when he was doing some work on his ~1820 house he found a shoe concealed above the ceiling near his fireplace/chimney. A second shoe was found in the parlor and left there; just in case.

CONTINUED ON PAGE # 5

THE JANUARY WHAT'Z IT REVEALED . . .

Many of you no doubt recognized this as a shave of some sort, but what sort?



← 10" →

This shave is more or less local – it was made by the Millers Falls Tool Company in MA. In its day Millers Falls was a highly regarded manufacturer of tools. At any rate this tool is a finishing shave designed for working on tight inside curves, small radius work and concave work. There are not a lot of planes that can claim useability on concave work. Made from roughly 1885 to 1910 it proved to be a tool that users either loved or hated. I haven't tried to use one but they say it is extremely difficult to master. For a finishing shave the blade throat is so large that it is supposedly nearly impossible to get a fine, thin shaving. As such, there are not a lot of these left around as the haters just threw them out (very un-Yankee of them).

Oh yes – it is listed in the catalogues as a “cigar shave” – apparently due to the shape of the shave.

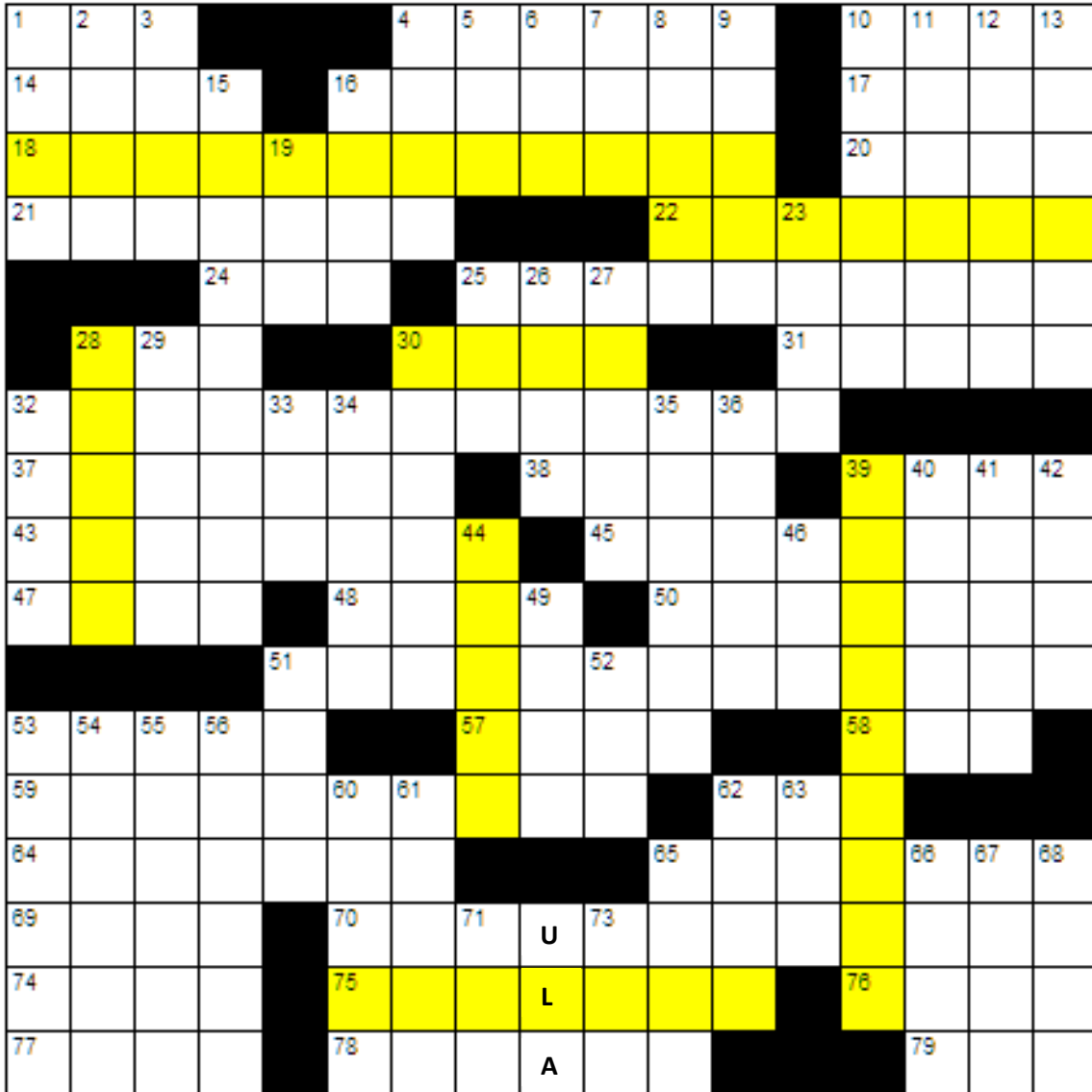
THE FEBRUARY WHAT'Z IT . . .

Past What'z Its have often featured various tools. This would seem to heavily favor the male readers so going forward we will try to cover a wider array of What'z It items.

CONTINUED ON PAGE # 7

FEBRUARY THEME CROSSWORD

The **yellow** blocks contain the theme words and all come from the text of this newsletter.
Enjoy and Happy Valentine's Day



ACROSS

1. Andrews or Vandenberg, briefly
4. Italian alcoholic beverage
10. One B + one B =
14. Alka-Seltzer sound
16. Gets support from
17. India harvest of winter crops
18. **BELIEF IN SUPERNATURAL**
20. Olive tree
21. Increases
22. **THE SUPERSTITIOUS DO THIS WITH SHOES**
24. Phone text abbreviations for “and”
25. Indecisive
28. “Despicable Me” character
30. **USED TO PROTECT AGAINST SPIRITS**
31. Chutzpah
32. Asking someone to explain exactly
37. Higher standard degrees
38. Uses a chair
39. Decree
43. Boat in “Gilligan’s Island” sitcom
45. Fools lack; sound judgement
47. And others, for short
48. Capital of Samoa
50. Change places
51. Bewilderment
53. Accused’s need
57. A totem symbolizes this
58. Discount rack abbr.
59. An emphatic yes

ACROSS

62. Abbreviation for amount of alcohol in blood
 64. Interpret text or scripture
 65. Sponsorships by organizations
 69. Ashcroft’s predecessor
 70. Visual aid
 74. The Untouchables, e.g.
 75. **WHERE SOME SHOES WERE HIDDEN**
 76. Female name for “God is Gracious”
 77. Acronym for Social, Environmental, Scientific Education
 78. London Symphony conductor, Claudio_____
 79. Flavor enhancer
- DOWN** clues on page 4

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Letter to the Editor – If you would like to write a letter to the editor – they are always welcome and may appear in later issues (with permission of the writer), or:

Receive a Past Issue - they will be sent upon request. An index of past issues is also available. Ω

DOWN

1. _____ line (major axis of an elliptical orbit)
2. Soldering need
3. Comet co-finder with Hale
4. Catches on
5. Thor Heyerdahl craft
6. Household pest
7. Tire pressure
8. One may sit for a master
9. Bother
10. Surgical instrument
11. Former president of Poland
12. Sorcery practiced in the Caribbean
13. Flatbread roll similar to a bagel without the hole
15. Vegetable oil for peanuts
16. Consumed before taking a “trip”
19. Abbr. for boxing match div.
23. Opposite of SEbS in direction
25. Which person?
26. Markers
27. 18-wheelers
28. **A HIDDEN SHOE WARDS OFF A _____**
29. Name for a crazy horse
30. IT management systems operation
32. Stge. place
33. Press for payment
34. Yea _____
35. Loose woven cotton fabric
36. Jellied garnish

DOWN

39. **A DEITY CAN BESTOW ON FEMALES**
40. The balloon floated _____
41. A performer
42. Freshman, probably
44. **SALEM _____ TRIALS**
46. Big grocery chain
49. Is ill
51. Charades, essentially
52. _____ Schwartz
53. Heads off
54. Unit of language
55. Greek females named for peace
56. Former
60. Ancient city NW of Carthage
61. Famous person
62. Short for a floating mountain of ice
63. _____ Khan
65. _____ time were they in danger
66. Thailand, once
67. A long, long time
68. Catch
71. Short for politically left party
72. Red in Honolulu (it's a gimme)
73. “Windows” security identifier

A thought for our more seasoned readers –
From Will Rogers:

We could certainly slow the aging process down if it had to work its way through Congress.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE # 1

SUPERSTITION

CONCEALMENT SHOE IN FRANCESTOWN HOME

All this begs the questions: what is a concealmant shoe, what is its purpose and what makes us think these shoes in Hollis and Francestown fit that pattern?

1) What is a concealmant shoe? The National Museum of Scotland writes of them as “the odd shoe in a seemingly odd place in your home or other building”. The museum collection includes concealed shoes that have been discovered in many European countries as well as other parts of the world. One such shoe was found concealed behind the choir stalls in Winchester Cathedral built as early as 1306. Often they are found within walls, around door lintels and window sill casings, behind wainscoting, beneath floor boards, and in chimney breasts.

2) Why? To the title of this article – superstition. The reasons could be many but center around the belief that they had magical charm including the ability to protect the building’s occupants against the

evil influences of demons, ghosts and witches. Another belief was that they constituted an offering to a household deity. Yet another belief was that they were intended to bestow fertility on a female member of a household.

The colonists coming to America brought many of these beliefs with them. Many of the concealmant shoes that have been located in the US date to the 1800s. The practice grew to include not only shoes but dried cats, horse skulls, charms and witch bottles. A short aside may be warranted here for those who are not familiar with a witch bottle. It is a charm to protect against evil spirits, magical attacks, and counteract spells cast by witches. It is believed that they would draw in and trap harmful intentions directed at their owners. Such a

bottle can be seen in the Heritage Museum. We cannot say for certain that it was used as such but there have been no known hauntings of the museum.



3) Do the Francestown and Hollis shoes meet the characteristics of a concealmant shoe? Well there is obviously nobody to confirm the fact but they do exhibit the characteristics of being concealmant shoes.

The time frame of the houses fits – both dating to the early 1800’s. The locations where they were found fits – concealed in the ceilings and walls in the area of the fireplace/chimney breast. The fact that neither is a pair fits. They are the odd shoe found in an odd place. They are consistent with their historic surroundings.

Why did folks feel these were effective at protecting them from evil and why shoes as opposed to other articles of clothing. A well-worn shoe has in the sole the imprint

CONTINUED ON PAGE # 6

CONTINUED FROM PAGE # 5

SUPERSTITION

of the person who has been wearing it. In the inner sole as over time the leather molded to the wearer's foot. This, it was thought, led to the notion that the wearer's spiritual presence resided in the shoe and this acted as a protection against witchcraft. In the case of children's shoes it was a grieving memorial to the loss of the child. It is also interesting to note that a majority of concealed shoes are found in the houses of working class families. Because shoes were very expensive they were held dear by working class people and thus a fitting tribute to the lost child.

Another reason folks felt shoes were effective at protecting them was the human scent of the shoe attracted witches who, upon entering the shoe, became trapped (apparently witches were thought unable to back up).

Yet another reason is shoes were considered good luck symbols and greeting cards showed old boots next to horseshoes with a good luck message.

Another custom where the origin is not commonly known relates to shoes being used to bestow fertility on a female in a house. For some reason shoes came to be associated with fertility. This may have given rise to the custom of tying shoes to the rear bumper of a car carrying the bride and groom to their honeymoon. This connection with fertility is also believed to be the origin of the nursery rhyme: "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe and had so many children, she didn't know what to do."

All this said, it seems that the superstition-



fueled traditions and practices surrounding shoes, including that of the concealment shoe, died out in Europe by 1900. They are thought to have continued in the US as late as the 1930s.

Superstitions were many and strongly held by our ancestors. While this may seem unusual to modern day readers, superstitious practices have always permeated human society. Do you avoid walking under ladders, breaking a mirror, etc.? What about the spirit world - do you believe in ghosts?

At a recent gathering, an individual with ties to the Francestown area related an event in their past. This story was told by a sensible senior member of the town.

Having recently purchased an early 1800s home in Francestown, the homeowner

CONTINUED ON PAGE # 7

CONTINUED FROM PAGE # 6

SUPERSTITION

settled in for the first night along with the family cat. Later that night the homeowner awoke sensing (there was no sound) footsteps on the stairs and they were coming closer to the second floor. As the steps got closer the room started to get colder and colder. The homeowner (a firm disbeliever in ghosts and such) thought this must be a dream but for the cat, which was now backed up against the headboard with back arched and fur standing on end making the strangest, what can only be described as, guttural growl imaginable – an eerie sound to be coming from such a small animal.

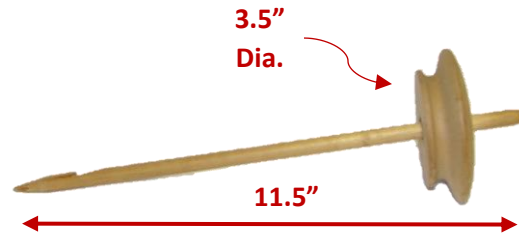


Once at the top of the stairs the footsteps turned and started to move off to another part of the house. As they departed the bedroom started to slowly warm and the cat went back to sleep. It should be noted that nobody was aware of any concealment shoes having ever been found in this 1780s house.

A superstitious person might well look upon this and conclude that it was the presence of a spirit or ghost, and you? Still don't believe in ghosts? Given the opportunity, would you not hide a concealment shoe, just in case? Ω

CONTINUED FROM PAGE #1

THE FEBRUARY WHAT'Z IT



This is a simple version of several much larger exhibits that we have on display at the Heritage Museum.

Let us know what you think this What'z It is called and its use. Win a free lifetime membership in the Heritage Museum. Ω



FEET . . .

While we are, sort of, on the topic of feet and winter is upon us, how about a quick look at our progress since the colonial days in regard to foot comfort at night? That is to say keeping your feet warm in bed. Not hard to do these days with electric blankets, central heat and cushy bedding.

Compare that to our colonists going to bed on a straw mattress supported on a rope bed in an unheated room in a log cabin or worse. Doesn't that just thrill you to think of bedtime? Well the Heritage Museum can show you what it was like. Starting with the rope bed.



CONTINUED ON PAGE # 8

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FEET . . .

Rope beds were common in America until the 18th century. In a rope bed, ropes create a crisscross support system for the hay and straw mattresses that were in use.

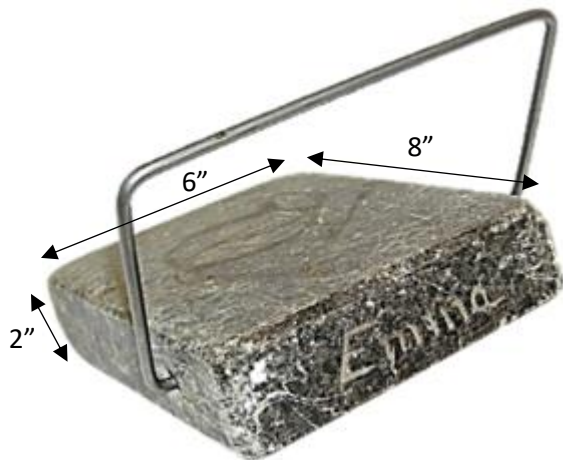
One good thing was the hand made heavy quilts they had for covers.



The Heritage Museum has such a quilt for your viewing. This patchwork quilt was made in the traditional method of cutting, piecing together and stitching scraps of fabric from worn out shirts, and other cloth items.

Still you were in an unheated cabin in winter and your feet are the first thing to get cold. To their rescue, especially in Francestown where soapstone was mined, came the soapstone bed warmer.

Apparently Emma wanted it known that this was her bed warmer stone.



CONTINUED

Placed near the fire before bedtime the stone would absorb the heat. When ready for bed the user would take the stone and rub it over the mattress to warm it up. Then, wrapped in a piece of cloth, it was placed at the foot of the bed where it would continue to slowly release the heat stored in it from the fire and keep the users' feet warm throughout the rest of the night.

Of course the Heritage Museum has a soapstone bed warmer for you to see.

Not limited to the bed, these foot warmers could be placed in a sleigh or buggy to make the journey less unpleasant. Ω

A final note on concealment shoes. We have made reference to concealment shoe(s) being found in homes both in Hollis and Francestown. Both of these are older homes dating back to the early 1800s and in locations where concealment shoes were usually hidden.

Since New England has many such older homes, it seems probable that there are other homes where shoes have been found. If you have some of these concealment shoe(s) in your home. Let us know. Better yet, if you still have the shoe(s) and would like to donate or lend them to the Heritage Museum, we would be most happy to create such an exhibit.

PUZZLE SOLUTION

A	F	B		G	R	A	P	P	A		T	W	O	B				
P	L	O	P		L	E	A	N	S	O	N		R	A	B	I		
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