

# Johnston Historical Society

## Historical Notes

Vol. XXVIII, #3

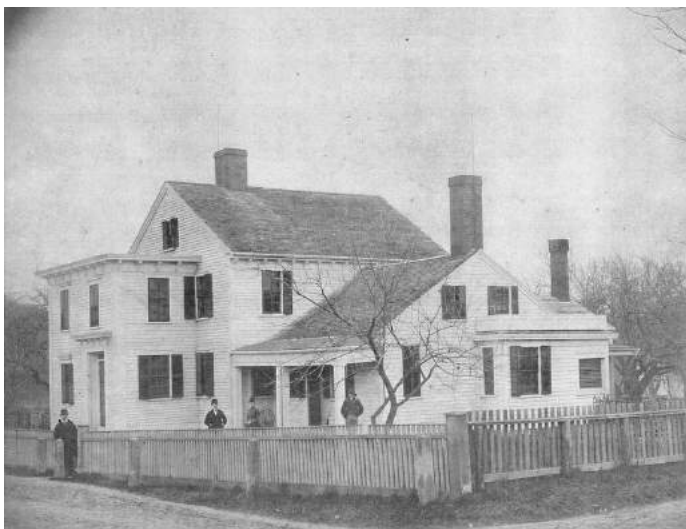
Christopher Martin, Editor  
[www.JohnstonHistorical.org](http://www.JohnstonHistorical.org)

December 2022

### The Harris Family of Morgan Avenue (Part One)

by Steve Merolla

Situated at 216 Morgan Avenue is a colonial-era house well known to people of the area. This fine yellow dwelling is surrounded by beautiful gardens and plantings as impressive as the house itself. Also notable are the many well-maintained outbuildings on the property. Now owned by Society member Anthony Ricci, for decades it was the dwelling of the colorful and feisty Mabel Atwood Sprague. This was the Atwood family homestead, owned by them for many generations. What most people may not know is that the house itself and the property were previously in the possession of the Harris family.



Andrew Harris House, 216 Morgan Avenue, late 1800s. The tall middle section is the oldest part of the house.

In the mid 1600s, a Joseph Wise of Roxbury, Massachusetts owned about 600 acres of land in this part of town, with 300 acres laying on both the north and south sides of Morgan Avenue, then known as the "Scituate Road." In the 1690s and early 1700s, a partnership of Thomas Harris and Major Thomas Fenner purchased the southern part of "Wise's Farm," which was to be divided equally between the two parties. This large estate was not officially divided until April 18, 1722, as is indicated on an important plat map that exists today. Comments written on the map itself state: *"This is a plat of the Southern part of the farme formerly owned by Jos. Wise... & the part formerly purchased by Thomas Harris & Thomas Fenner... is now divided between Nicholas Harris of the one part and Richard & Joseph Fenner of*

*the other part..."* By this time, the original purchasers were deceased, with Richard and Joseph Fenner being the heirs of Major Thomas Fenner and Nicholas Harris being the heir of Thomas Harris. The Fenners received about 168 acres of land, situated mostly in the area of Neutaconkanut Hill. Nicholas Harris received around 172 acres, to the west of the Hill. It should be noted that the amount of land indicated is more than the 300 acres first purchased, but it must be taken into account that land surveying was not as exact then as today.

The Thomas Harris who purchased part of "Wise's Farm" was of the second generation of that family in Rhode Island. He was the only son of the first Thomas Harris. This first Thomas Harris was born July 11, 1613, in Kent, England, and was married to Elizabeth Litherland (also born in England) around 1645, in Salem, Massachusetts. Thomas 1st was part of John Lothrop's dissident group in London, they being Congregationalists; it is thought that he sailed on the *Griffin* with Lothrop. His older brother William Harris was of the first group of six to settle Providence with Roger Williams; Thomas 1st was of the second group to arrive, making a total of thirteen who signed the original "compact" forming the town of Providence. Thomas 1st died June 7, 1686.



Andrew Harris House, June 2019. (Google Street View).

The latest research indicates that Thomas Harris 2nd was born October 14, 1645, and married Elnathan Tew on November 3, 1664; she was the daughter of Richard and Mary Tew of Newport, and they had nine children. Thomas 2nd died on February 22, 1710/11. Part of his Will stated: *"Thirdly, I give to my son Nicholas Harris a Parcell of land where he now dwelleth which ...contains 165 acres..."* This term of the Will is important in that it states that Nicholas was already living on the parcel and had obviously built a house thereon, a situation confirmed by the

above-noted plat map. It should also be noted that Thomas 2nd himself was likely living in Providence.

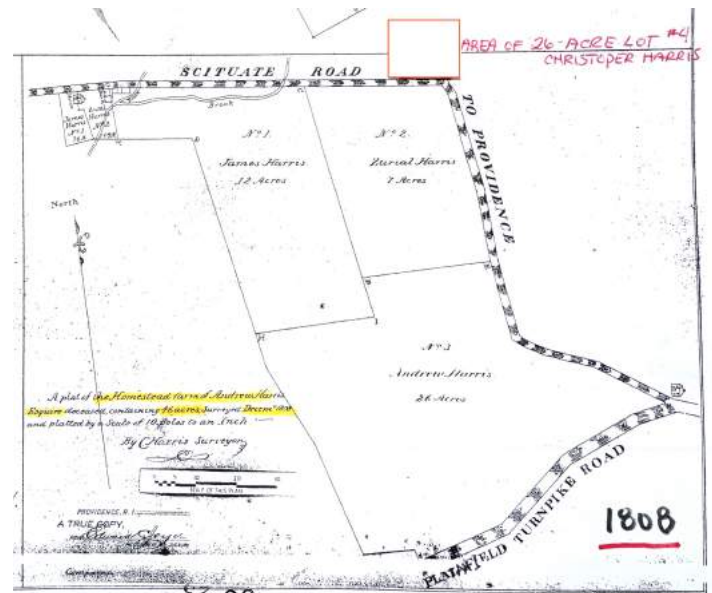
Nicholas was born April 5, 1671, and married Anne Hopkins; they had ten children. He drew up his Will on July 16, 1725 (Prov. Wills 4/184), some twenty years before his death; in it, he states that he was "sick and weake of body," but he obviously regained his health. In part, his Will reads: "...I give & bequeath to my two sons, namely Thomas Harris and Joseph Harris all my Homestead lands & Tenements whereon I dwell in Providence [later Johnston] aforesaid excepting a small piece of land I shall hereafter give to my son Christopher; and my sd son Thomas' part is to be bounded by a line beginning at a Grate Chestnut Logg lying across the Brook a little above the Pond and from thence to run Southwardly to a Grate Remarkable Rock [underlining my own] in the Goat Pasture..." The small piece of land given to Christopher was two acres lying along present-day Morgan Avenue, on the north side of the homestead, which would include two rows of apple trees from the orchard and to "...have the convenience of the water for the setting up of the Smith's trade..." The intriguing part of the Will is in fact the mention of the "Grate Remarkable Rock," which of course in all probability is the well-known Hipses Rock (also known as "Indian Rock"), which was the southwestern boundary marker of the second land purchase between Roger Williams and the Narragansett Indians. The stated boundary between the lands of Thomas and Joseph (later Christopher) Harris have really not changed in some 300 years, and Hipses Rock is in fact right on the boundary of the two properties to this day, though now united as one entity by Anthony Ricci. Unfortunately, Joseph Harris died young; thus on April 22, 1739, Nicholas had to write a Codicil to the original Will, which had been written fourteen years earlier; the main point of the Codicil was to transfer Joseph's share of the estate to his brother Christopher (Prov. Wills 4/186). The Codicil mentions that Christopher had set up a "shop" and also significantly states "...to take up two rows of apple trees of the orchard westerly of my sd son Christopher's house.... Thus, we know that by 1739, at least, Christopher had built his own house, which was probably very close to Morgan Avenue and not very far from the present-day dwelling at 216 Morgan Avenue. However, a return of a highway project in the year 1735 mentions "...the highway laid out by John Manton westwardly to the corner of Joseph Borden's land & to go southerly until it comes to the highway (Morgan Avenue) near where Christopher Harris dwells..." (Providence Town Council Records, February 16, 1735/6, pg. 106), thus putting the build date of his dwelling at least a few years earlier. Exactly where the Nicholas Harris house was situated is not known for sure, but the 1882 Hopkins Map does name a parcel of land a couple of blocks west of 216 Morgan Avenue as the "Stone Chimney Lot." This stone chimney could have been part of a "stone-ender" type of house possibly belonging to Nicholas Harris; this style of house was in evidence even until the early 1700s.

Nicholas Harris died March 27, 1746. His wife Anne refused to be administrator of the estate, which was taken up by son Thomas. The inventory of the estate came to about £383, quite a decent amount for that era. It included the usual household wares along with a mare, three cows, a heifer, a pair of three-year-old steers, a young ox, a small steer and thirty-one sheep. By the

terms of their father's Will and Codicil, Thomas and Christopher Harris took possession of their father's estate.

It is at this point that the stories of brothers Thomas and Christopher Harris may be separated, for they now both had their own estates on which to live. The devolution of Christopher's property will now be followed, for it was on this parcel that the house at 216 Morgan Avenue now stands.

Christopher Harris was the fifth son of Nicholas and Anne Harris, born December 13, 1706. He married his cousin Anna Harris, daughter of Toleration Harris, probably by the year 1734; they had five children, the first being Andrew, born around the year 1736. The other children were William (died before 1777), Anne (married Thomas Whipple), Sarah (married John Brown) and Amey (married Charles Lee). Deed records indicate that Anne died between August 1772 and November 1773.



The square at top represents the main part of Christopher Harris' estate (extrapolated from an 1808 plat map of his son's probate record). Scituate Road is present-day Morgan Avenue and Plainfield Turnpike is present-day School Street.

Christopher was an important individual in the military history of Rhode Island. Like many able-bodied men, he served in the local militia, first appearing as an ensign in Providence's 3rd Militia Company in 1734. The next year he was promoted to Lieutenant of the same Company, which was soldiered by men living in his locality. It seems obvious that Christopher had the avocation to be a soldier, because within fifteen years he rose to the very highest rankings of the military hierarchy in the state. From 1751 to 1754, he was appointed Colonel of the Providence County Regiment. In 1754, the war for control of North America broke out between France with their Indian allies and Great Britain. In North America, the conflict came to known as the French and Indian War and the Seven Years War in Europe. It was in fact a global struggle. Colonel Christopher Harris was given command of the Rhode Island Regiment of Militia, which was this state's primary contribution to the war effort, on at least three occasions. He was in that command in the years 1755 (against Crown Point), 1756, and 1760. In 1754, he was the commanding Colonel of the Providence County Regiment, comprising four

companies of 100 men, in the expedition against Crown Point that year. In May, 1759, as Commander of the Rhode Island Regiment, he was selected to lead the "Regiment to be raised for the reduction of Montreal and other places in Canada." In this campaign, militias from New York and New England moved up through the Hudson River Valley from Albany in an attempt to capture the French forts at Ticonderoga and Crown Point on Lake Champlain and to invade Canada. The conflict ended in 1763, a British victory that changed the future of North America, as the British gained control of Canada.

The officials of the Colony of Rhode Island were surely grateful for the services of Colonel Christopher Harris, and it seems that they rewarded him with a ceremonial or "presentation" sword. In the Will of his son Andrew (1807), it is stated that Andrew is leaving to his son Christopher that very sword: "...to my son Christopher my Silver Gilded Sword which was his grandfather Christopher Harris' and is marked with the initials C.H...." Unfortunately, it seems that this artifact of the military history of the state and of the Harris family has been lost to time.

Aside from his military exploits, Christopher Harris was also involved in town government. An Act dividing the Town of Johnston out of Providence was passed by the General Assembly on March 15, 1759, and it was Christopher Harris who was chosen to call a meeting of the Freemen of the new town in order to elect officials for the new entity. The meeting was held on April 18, 1759, at the house of Benjamin Belknap, which formerly stood at the corner of Greenville Avenue and Pine Hill Avenue. Christopher was chosen as one of the two "Raters of Estates," along with neighbor William Alverson. Two Town Meetings were held at his house in 1770, and he was appointed Moderator of the Meeting twenty-one times between the years 1768 and 1773. He was elected to the Town Council in 1764 and 1765, and eleven Council meetings were held at his house. Aside from his military and government service, Christopher carried on the trade of blacksmithing, as is indicated in his own and his father's Wills, and even in some deeds.

Christopher drew up his Will on May 25, 1777. The document reveals that his wife and son William were deceased at this point; he left his three daughters £15 pounds apiece, they being Anne, Sarah, and Amey. Being the only surviving male heir, Andrew Harris inherited the whole of his father's estate (Johnston Probate 1/134): "*Item, I give & bequeath to my son Andrew Harris my Homestead Farm... together with all the buildings thereon standing... Also I give to my son Andrew all my Stock of Cattle, farming Tools, Blacksmith Tools, together with all the rest & residue of my Personal Estate...*" (Johnston Wills 1/134). Christopher Harris died on July 27, 1781.

*The story of the Harris family will be continued in a future issue of the newsletter. -- Ed.*

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### Society Doings

Anthony Ursillo hosted a yard and antiques sale at the Shang Bailey Roadhouse on Columbus Day weekend. He was able to raise \$364 for the Society through vendor fees and sales.

Spooky Story night on October 13th was a success. We had around fifteen attendees, and many had spine-chilling stories to tell about their brushes with the unexplained.

Author and historian Marty Podskoch was the speaker at our October 26th meeting, telling us all about his new travel book, *The Rhode Island 39 Club: Your Passport and Guide to Exploring Rhode Island*. He discussed how the book came about, and how its unique "club" approach encourages readers of all ages to visit all thirty-nine Rhode Island cities and towns, collecting "passport" stamps as they go.

A small but hearty coterie of members braved the rainy weather to attend our November 30th general meeting. Smith-Appleby House Museum Curator Sandra Achille (right; photo by Carl Johnson) brought part of her large collection of Esmond Mill blankets and related ephemera.



*An Esmond blanket. Photo by Christopher Martin.*

The Esmond Mill, located in Smithfield, operated from 1906 to 1948. After its closure, the Esmond Mill property became the corporate headquarters for Benny's. One of the oldest buildings in the Esmond Mills/Benny's complex, a former storehouse, is slated to become an Esmond Mills Museum, housing a portion of Sandra Achille's collection.



*"Skookum" dolls from the 1920s, clothed in Esmond or Beacon Mills scraps.  
Photo by Christopher Martin.*

fieldstones that are the markers for many of the early members of the Harris family, no doubt.



*Parts of JN057 were already looking pretty spiffy as seen in this shot from April, when the cemetery committee still had months of work ahead of them.  
Photo by Christopher Martin.*

Members Anthony Ursillo and Tim Kee hosted a wonderful holiday party at the historic Shang Bailey Roadhouse on December 9. About seventy-five people dropped by to enjoy refreshments, listen to live music, socialize, and wander through the newly-painted and papered rooms of the roadhouse, filled with eclectic furnishings and objects collected by Anthony and Tim.

A big thank you to violinist Mari Ingesson and her guitar-strumming fiancé Peter Kiley for adding the perfect seasonal auditory accompaniment. Thanks to Phil Lemoi for decorating the front porch of Shang Bailey's. Thank you also to all who contributed to the pot luck refreshments, and a huge thank you to Tim for all his help with set-up and prep.

Our Museum Barn hosts in-person beginning yoga sessions, led by Satya Wellness, on Monday nights. It's \$15 per class (prepaid cards are available), and open to all. Details at [www.Satya-wellness.com](http://www.Satya-wellness.com).

### **Cemetery Committee Report**

by Steve Merolla

The Cemetery Committee spent the last half of the Summer and much of the Fall in the work of finishing up Cemetery #57, a journey that began last year. As related in the previous report, this was a burial ground for the Harris family, and it is in fact one of the two last large cemeteries in town that must be restored. It was a big job, and the numbers bear this out. The Committee made twenty work visits to this cemetery. We re-set into the ground or mortared into their bases thirty-two headstones; of those, eight had to be repaired. A total of twenty footstones were either re-set in the ground or mortared into their bases; of these, six had to be repaired. Considering that there are fifty inscribed or "marked" stones in this burial ground, the percentage amount of re-sets was very high indeed. Also straightened and lifted were many of the fifty or so unmarked "crude stones," plain

In a special note, there was a small marble statuette of a lamb sitting atop the gravestone of Leah Winsor, a small child. Unfortunately, the front half of the lamb was missing; property owner Anthony Ricci and his daughters Sara and Erica fashioned a new front half in plaster, and the decoration is now complete once more, a job well done.



*Photo by Elise Carlson, November 11, 2022.*

Our first visit to #57 was on September 21, 2021, and the last on October 27, 2022. Thus, there were many opportunities for the Committee members to enjoy coffee and donuts while on break at that site. It must be said that the cemetery is situated on a short but steep hill that we won't miss climbing up, especially when hauling equipment. It reminds one a bit of a small version of "Little Round Top" at Gettysburg.

When not actually in restoration mode, the Committee cleans and maintains those lots already restored. After finishing with #57, the group cleaned up the interior of #23 (corner of Cherry Hill Road and Atwood Avenue, next to Walgreens), #37 (also on Anthony Ricci's property), and the double #59/#60 (Morgan Condos). In addition, on October 20, a volunteer group from Citizens Bank mowed and weed-whacked the two large cemeteries behind Silvio's Restaurant off Greenville Avenue, they being #18 and #72. These two lots, especially #72 are always tough to handle, and it was good getting them done at the end of the work season. Many thanks to the Citizens work group, who did a great job. On November 17, Mr. Ken Brown cleaned #12, where his ancestors of the Brown family are interred. Ken is a new contact and we hope he can adopt that cemetery going ahead. We also ran into Mr. Dave Muscatelli when cleaning up the previously mentioned #23 at Walgreens. He is related to the Waterman family of that burial ground and is doing his best to mow and weed-whack; unfortunately, the company that was in charge of maintaining the site was not doing a very thorough job, so Dave has stepped up to the plate.

As always, many thanks to the volunteers who maintain a few of our cemeteries on a regular basis such as Joe Jamroz, Dan and Mitchell Parrillo and Kevin Sarli. A special thanks also to the Director of the Johnston Public Works Department, Mr. Don DelSignore. Don and his department quickly clean up any brush piles, tree limbs, etc. that we leave behind and on occasion have even taken initiative to deal with downed trees in our cemeteries. Once again, many thanks to the members of the Cemetery Committee: Doug Stephens, Elise Carlson, George Picotte, Carl Johnson, Steve Merolla and Marie Thierfelder. All year long they work in all kinds of weather conditions.

*An album of photos of JN057 from 2008 through 2022 can be found on our Facebook page. -- Ed.*

### **Volunteers Needed!**

Retirees, Scouts, students! We always need volunteers to perform various duties to ensure the smooth operation of the society. For instance, we could use a Properties Committee to oversee the maintenance of our properties. Or volunteers to serve as docents in the Elijah Angell House during open hours. Or someone to help on meeting nights, setting up coffee, setting up the room, etc. The president would like to see many people doing small jobs.

More examples:

- 1) Help out on the cemetery committee, maintaining lots and repairing stones.
- 2) Someone familiar with excel to help keep track of membership dues.
- 3) Someone to transcribe old documents.
- 4) A "handy person" experienced in handling odd jobs and small repairs.
- 5) People willing to show the museum to visitors. Most of the exhibits are marked, so it doesn't require an in-depth knowledge of the town or its history.
- 6) Weeding our gardens.
- 7) Knowledgeable people who can help identify some of our old photographs.

- 8) Someone with design or layout experience who can help us revamp our tri-fold flyers.

Or, if you have a special talent that you think could help the JHS, let us know! Indoor tasks will be completed in small groups. Not all tasks are long-term, so you're not "on the hook" once you volunteer. We would like to establish a "who to call list" as needs arise. Interested parties should send an email to [johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com](mailto:johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com).

### **Our Properties**

Both the museum and Elijah Angell House continue to be open by appointment -- we always welcome visits by interested individuals or groups. Just shoot us an email at [johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com](mailto:johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com), or leave a message at (401) 231-3380 to set one up.

Our museum space is also available (on a limited basis) for meetings of small groups of adults at a reasonable price. If you know of a local group or organization that is looking for a meeting space, and might be interested in using our museum, please have them contact us.

### **Acquisitions**

Many donated objects may be seen in the "Acquisitions and Items from our Collections" photo album on our Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical](http://www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical)). As always, our sincere thanks to all who have donated items for our collections. Keep it coming!

- Christopher Martin donated a jar opener from Cherry Hill Manor.
- The Wilder family donated some items related to their dairy farms (bottles, milk caps, branded pencils), as well as some Civil War-era letters.
- George Picotte donated some family items, including an ice card from Picotte Ice & Oil Inc. and George's diploma from the Calef School.
- From eBay: a 1911 postcard of the house at the corner of Killingly Street and Greenville Avenue; an undated photo of Manton Pharmacy.
- Meredith Brown Clarke donated a collection of glass plate negatives in the name of her father, John Olney Waterman Brown (1904-'72). She thinks "they originally came from the estate of a relative, 'Pap' Chapman, a local veterinarian."

### **Wish List**

Following are a number of items we could make good use of:

- Display mannequins
- Old photos, slides, or home movies of Johnston
- Any Johnston-related ephemera or memorabilia
- A gas-powered leaf blower
- Fire extinguishers

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### **Nine Ways You Can Help the Johnston Historical Society:**

- 1) The Find on 6, 2953 Hartford Avenue, is still accepting consignment items on behalf of the JHS! That means you can donate some gently used white elephant items and, if they sell, JHS gets 60% of the

proceeds! Each person may bring two boxes of goods at a time, Wednesday through Friday, 11am-4pm. Appropriate items include antiques, collectibles, vintage clothing or handbags (in good condition), jewelry, kitchenware, furniture, etc. Nothing broken or soiled.

2) When purchasing items on Amazon, if you enter via smile.amazon.com, you can designate JHS to receive a small portion of the purchase price as a charitable donation!

3) Buy a book! We still have copies of *Images of America: Johnston I and II*. \$15 each, or two for \$25!

4) Buy a t-shirt! We still have new t-shirts for sale in slate blue and khaki, and we have a few left in sage green. S/M/L or XL. \$15 each. Pick one up at an upcoming general meeting, or drop us a line and we'll arrange to deliver one to you.

5) Keep your membership up-to-date. Your dues help keep us in the black!

6) Volunteer! (See above, "Volunteers Needed").

7) Advertise in this newsletter. Each issue of the newsletter costs about \$120 for 100 copies. We started carrying ads in 2018 with the goal of making the newsletter self-supporting. Do you have a local business that our members might want to know about? See our rate card on the next page.

8) Stop n Shop has a program where they donate \$1 from every purchase of a \$2.50 shopping bag to a local charity. The Johnston Historical Society has once again been chosen as the charity for the month of December 2022 -- at the Greenville store! So if you're planning on buying a shopping bag, December is the time to do it!

9) And of course, we always welcome cash donations!



### Historical Advertising

This issue's historical ad was found in the April 20, 1961, issue of the *Observer*. The address is the current home of Ocean State Auto Repair. Before that it was Larkin's Auto Repair and Marcello's Transmissions.



### Upcoming Events

#### December 28, 2022

No meeting -- happy Holidays!

#### January 22, 2023

General Meeting

1pm

Special Sunday meeting. Paul F. Caranci is the author of numerous books on Rhode Island history, but this afternoon he'll be talking about two: *WIRED: The Shocking True Story of Political Corruption and the FBI Informant Who Risked Everything to Expose It* and *Scoundrels: Defining Corruption Through Tales of Political Intrigue in Rhode Island*.

#### February 19, 2023

General Meeting

1pm

Special Sunday meeting. Speaker TBD.

#### March 29, 2023

General Meeting

7pm

Paul St. Amand, grandson of mapmaker George Matteson, will present and speak about his grandfather's maps. Matteson hand-drew numerous maps of Rhode Island localities, full of historical and anecdotal details about people, landmarks, and events, in the mid-twentieth century.

Do you have a suggestion for a future speaker? Or do you yourself have a topic you'd like to present at one of our meetings? Please drop us a line at johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com or leave a message at (401) 231-3380.

### Contribute To Our Newsletter!

We are always looking for articles for our newsletter. Naturally, we would like pieces that have to do with the town's history, but if you have an interest that ties in with history somehow, why not share it with us? Maybe you collect old snuffboxes or old railroad material. Maybe you have done some of your family history that others might be interested in. Maybe you would like to talk about the old days in Johnston. Wouldn't it be fun to share your knowledge! You do not have to be a great writer to put together an article. None of us are great literary figures. If you need help though, one of us would be glad to assist you.

We think that it will make for a much better newsletter if others contribute pieces that they have written. Remember, your reminiscences about the old days in Johnston will become valuable pieces of our town's history. But if you do not get them down on paper, they will be lost forever. We should make sure that future generations know what went on in times past.

**Next newsletter deadline: March 15, 2023.**



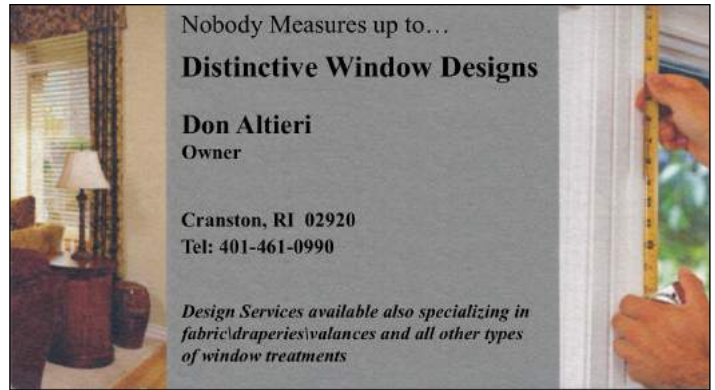
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As of this month our Facebook and Instagram pages have 1,522 and 266 followers, respectively! Have you 'liked' us yet? To find us type these addresses into your computer browser:



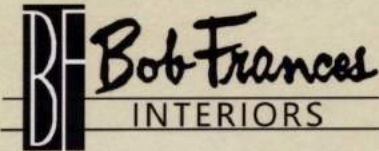
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**Our Executive Board**

President: Elise Carlson  
Vice-President: Steve Merolla  
Treasurer: Joe Jamroz  
Recording Secretary: Carl Johnson  
Corresponding Secretary: Christopher Martin  
Trustees: Dan Brown, Doug Stephens, Anthony Ursillo,  
and one vacant position.

Our Executive Board meets at 6:30pm in the Museum building, 101 Putnam Pike, on the second to the last Wednesday of each month, September through June (except December). All are welcome to attend.

General Meetings are held at 7pm the last Wednesday of each month, September through June (no December meeting. We hold our Holiday Party that month). The meetings are held in the Museum Barn.

Phone: (401) 231-3380  
Website: www.JohnstonHistorical.org  
Email: johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com  
Facebook: www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical

**Annual Dues**

Have you paid your 2022 dues yet? Your dues help us to operate. The price of a single membership is only \$20; a family membership is only \$30. Wotta bargain! So once more, please pay your 2022 dues. Send us a check today!

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Don't forget -- your donations to the Johnston Historical Society can be deducted from your taxes. We are registered with the Federal Government as a non-profit organization.

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JOHNSTON, RHODE ISLAND 02919**