

Proceedings  
of the  
Brookline  
Historical Society  
For 1979-1984



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## Spring Meeting – May 20, 1979

The spring meeting of the Brookline Historical Society will be held at the Bay Bank/Norfolk County Trust Company, Coolidge Corner, at four o'clock on Sunday afternoon.

The building was completed in May 1931 in the Art Deco style of architecture.

Leslie S. Larkin will present a paper entitled "Coolidge Corner Families: The Coolidges, the Griggs, the Stearns, and the Whitneys." Mrs. Larkin is the vice-president elect of the Brookline Historical Society, historian, and photographer.

## Coolidge Corner Families: The Coolidges, the Griggs, the Stearns, and the Whitneys

*(The following is excerpted from an article in The Brookline Chronicle by Dorothy Clemens.)*

"Coolidge Corner Families: The Coolidges, the Griggs, the Stearns and the Whitneys," was the title of a slide lecture given by Leslie S. Larkin at the Bay Bank/Norfolk County Trust Co. at Coolidge Corner on Sunday, May 20 at the spring meeting of the Brookline Historical Society.

While the purpose of the lecture was to examine the influence of those four families on the history and development of Coolidge Corner, several buildings of interest in that area were discussed first, including the bank itself, which replaced an earlier office and bank built and owned by Charles Stearns; the Beacon Universalist Church, built in 1906 and now the Coolidge Corner theater building; and the Arcade building, the only one of its type in Brookline.

Slides of old maps and atlases were shown in order to locate the land holdings and houses of the four families from 1822 through 1897. The Coolidge, Stearns and Whitney houses could only be seen in copies of old photographs, but the William J. Griggs house still stands at 51 Centre Street, where it was moved from Harvard Street in 1915.

Photographs of Beacon Street, taken by the engineers Aspinwall and Lincoln in 1887 just before the widening of Beacon Street, as well as several views of farms and pastures, illustrated the rural character of the town before the laying out of the boulevard designed by F. L. and J. C. Olmsted. The introduction of a street railway opened the way for Brookline's conversion to a suburb of Boston.

The history of Henry Melville Whitney's plan for the widening of Beacon Street, and his formation of a syndicate — the West End Land Co. — was outlined. More slides of the old and new Beacon Street illustrated the change. The building of the present S. S. Pierce Building emphasized the contrast between it and the old Coolidge and Bro. store on the same site.

Finally, pictures of Coolidge Corner in 1926 and a picture of the old Charles Stearns house on the southeast corner of Beacon and Harvard Streets, half-hidden by an office and bank building, completed the story of the transformation of Coolidge Corner from rural to urban. □

## Leslie Larkin's Notes

*A Guide to North Brookline*, listed below, was published three years after this lecture was given. The publication is cited because it contains information on the development of Coolidge Corner and Beacon Street. Relevant to the subject of the four Coolidge Corner families are the introduction and tour one, parts of tours two and three, and its bibliography and the additional sources cited. Sources cited there are not repeated in the following list.

Benka, Carla W. and Larkin, Leslie S. *A Guide to North Brookline: Five Walking Tours*. Brookline: Brookline Historical Commission, 1982.

Jones, Theodore F. and White, Charles F. "Land Ownership in Brookline." *Proceedings of the Brookline Historical Society*. 1923.

Massachusetts Historical Commission: Beacon Street Area, Brookline, recorded summer 1980, for the Inventory of Historical Assets of the Commonwealth, and proposed for National Register listing.

Stearns, Charles H. "Reminiscences of Harvard Street." *Proceedings of the Brookline Historical Society*. 1935.

Stearns, Charles H. "The Sewall House." *Proceedings of the Brookline Historical Society*. 1903.

## Fall Meeting – October 14, 1979

The fall meeting of the Brookline Historical Society will be held in the old Park School auditorium, 25 Kennard Road, at four o'clock on Sunday afternoon. The auditorium is adjacent to the historic Kennard House (c. 1840), once the home of ornithologist Frederick Kennard.

"Birding In Brookline" will be the paper presented by Henry T. Wiggin, Brookline Conservation commissioner, Town Meeting member, and an active birder in Brookline for over forty years.

## Birding in Brookline

by Henry T. Wiggin

**I**n these days of long gas lines, needed energy conservation, as well as \$1 and over per gallon of gas, perhaps birders should spend more time in their hometown looking for birds rather than traveling to the corners of the state. How well I remember the days during World War II of ration stamps for a gallon or two of gas a week and then for an extended period a total ban on pleasure driving. This meant that to bird you had to either use public transportation or shank's mare.

Residents of Brookline are indeed fortunate that there is such a wealth of birdlife here as well as diversity of habitat. As a Conservation Commissioner I have written a booklet "Birds of Brookline" and copies are available here for those who want one. It may surprise a citizen of Brookline to find out that since 1965, 181 species of birds have been seen or heard in the town, normally considered a built-up area.

In all honesty, I will have to say the two best birding areas in Brookline are private property, not open to Brookline residents for birding except when special permission is given for a Conservation Commission birdwalk. I refer to the Allandale farm area, Brookline's only working farm, owned by James Lawrence, and the Sargent estate. In my youth I knew Mr. and Mrs. Roger Ernst who lived in Sargent's and they permitted me to bird there.

There are many other good birding areas in the town however which are open to the public. One such spot is the Brookline reservoir. After the ice goes out in the spring, check the reservoir. Occasionally a lesser scaup duck, a ring-necked duck or a common golden-eye will pop in for a day or two. Mallards and black ducks are regulars. The reservoir is much better in the fall; late November is generally the best time for bird observation. What birds will be there varies tremendously from one year to another. It is a great mystery to me why with exactly the same habitat there should be ten species one year and only four the next. After great water fowl birding in the mid-1970s, the last two years have been sparse. Don't look for much in the reservoir until there has been some sort of freeze-up up north precipitating a southward flight. Once the birds find the reservoir they tend to stay there until the reservoir freezes around mid-December. The ruddy duck is uncommon in Massachusetts although it does breed at Plum Island's south pool. There, however, it is not always easy to see, and then usually the birder is peering through a telescope. At the reservoir, ruddies can be seen in fair numbers in late November until freeze-up, and an ordinary pair of binoculars should enable the birder to study the ruddy at fairly close range.

Another good place to study waterfowl is Leverett Pond. Go there in January when the reservoir and Jamaica Pond have frozen over. The part of Leverett near Boylston Street, just below the Brook House, has never frozen over completely. When only Leverett is open, all the waterfowl congregate there. Leverett is an excellent place to study the comical American coot. Don't confuse this species with the ducks the hunters call coot which are actually scoters; the coot is not a duck but belongs to the Galliformes family and is a cousin of the barnyard hen. Leverett Pond is also fine for woodduck observation. For the past three winters one to two pairs have wintered there and it is always a thrill to see the woody — the most beautiful of all the ducks. For a beginning birder Leverett should be visited in the winter to study gulls. Three species are common there: great black-back, herring, and ring-bill. Beginners continually have trouble differentiating between herrings and ring-bills. Here you can see numbers of both and a little study should prove valuable. Believe me, it is easier to study these at Leverett's than at Newburyport with the gulls three times further off, the temperature at zero and a twenty-five mile per hour wind howling around your ears.

Don't ignore the Leverett Pond for land birds. Redwinged blackbirds nest there; I usually find a mockingbird in the area during the winter and on good winter finch years I have had pine siskins there and once common redpolls. Check the brush for wintering song sparrows, white-throated sparrows, and formerly tree sparrows.

A third Brookline hot-spot is Hall's Pond, now owned by the town. For those of you who do not know Hall's, it is behind the Newhall apartments on Beacon Street near Hawes. Mallards and black ducks nest there. Hall's is a good place to find black-crowned night herons and green herons; some-



times the night heron arrives very early in the spring and stays late in the fall. Check Hall's for both spotted and the rarer solitary sandpiper in early May and also in mid- to late-August. The ring-necked pheasant nest at Hall's Pond as well as many other birds including American robin, gray catbird, song sparrow and common yellow-throat. Some good field observers are now studying this area in the migration season and many good records are turning up. Andy Agush had a worm-eating warbler there this past May, one of New England's rarest wood warblers.

Still another area to check is the Hoar Sanctuary which consists of twenty-five acres in back of the Baker School in the southern part of Brookline. The habitat is totally different from Hall's Pond. Here we have a forested area with both conifers and deciduous trees. The uncommon Princess pine is a ground cover in many places; there are good outcroppings of Roxbury puddingstone. Go to Hoar's in April and look along the stream for rusty blackbird which has become uncommon since the army murdered around ten million various kinds of blackbirds two years ago. Such species as downy and hairy woodpecker, white-breasted nuthatch, tufted titmouse, and scarlet tanager nest at Hoar's.

In the winter check out the conifer grove, mainly hemlocks, behind the Putterham clubhouse, Brookline's public golf course. Great horned owls have been there off and on for well over one hundred years. Trying to find an owl there is extremely difficult as owls have great protective coloration and really blend into the trees in which they roost. Red-tailed hawks can often be seen circling overhead; although a large hawk can, in fact, be seen almost anywhere in Brookline although they catch most of their prey – squirrels, rabbits and the like – in the Allandale farm area. One red-tail did in fact visit my birdfeeder one cold late January day to try to catch a squirrel. I wished him well, but unfortunately he missed and in my yard there was not enough open area for the somewhat unwieldy hawk to corner the squirrel.

Getting back to our conifer grove in back of the golf clubhouse, check this for wintering red-breasted nuthatches, brown creepers, golden-crowned kinglets, and if this is a good winter finch year possibly crossbills, siskins and the like. This grove is like the famed little girl with a curl right in the middle of her forehead; it is either very, very good or very, very horrid. Many a winter morn I've tramped through those woods with nothing to show for it but a frozen ear. I'll mumble to myself, "I'll never come here again," but then next winter will find me back there again and I might find species I won't see again for the rest of the year.

Don't forget Brookline's parks. While these areas over the long pull may not be as productive as the other areas I have mentioned, they do turn up things from time to time. I feel that if some of these areas were covered more thoroughly, by someone who lives nearby and checks it daily during the migration season, many worthwhile records would be made. To para-

phrase Gray's Elegy, "Full many a migrant is born to come unseen and waste its rareness on the unbirded park."

I remember two incidents involving Griggs Park, a park that happens to be in precinct ten, the precinct of which I served as an elected Town Meeting member. I was giving my pitch to a voter there when I heard a grackle's squeaky-door-hinge call. This was an extremely early date so I cut my pitch short, handed the voter my card, and dashed off as though shot from a cannon to Griggs Park. There high in a tree was a common grackle. Snow was deep, ice was underfoot, but for me spring had come; the first migrant had returned to Brookline.

Another time while campaigning in the Griggs Park section I heard a cedar waxwing. This transient is very hard to pin down. They do nest sparsely near my summer home in Annisquam, but from September to May if someone told me I could take them anywhere in the state and they'd give me a million dollars if I could show them a cedar waxwing, most of the time their money would be safe. Waxwings can appear anywhere, stay an hour, a day, a week, or a month only to vanish and not to come back to that same place again for years.

Brookline is fortunate in that a migration flyway goes right over the town. During the migration season birds can show up any place. My own home is often visited by migrants. Almost every year there will be a scarlet tanager singing from an oak in my front yard. Many times I've had from six to over fifteen species of warblers singing from my trees and flitting from one branch to another. I can be at Town Meeting until past one in the morning, but if the next morning from a nearby branch a Tennessee warbler sounds off at quarter to six, I'll spring from my bed wide awake and crane my neck outside the window wondering what *else* is out there.

The whole theme of my talk should be summed up by saying that a bird can show up almost anywhere in the town — sometimes even an unusual bird. I remember the summer an eastern kingbird nested in Coolidge Corner of all places. I remember in my youth a least bittern — the rarest and most reclusive of our Massachusetts herons — showed up for a day in a dead tree in front of a two-decker on Davis Avenue. My favorite story is about a February morning in 1976. I was in a foul mood having gone neck over end on the ice while putting a day's supply of bird food in various bird feeders. I knew all day long I'd be making out income tax returns in my office, hardly an inspiring thing to look forward to. I knew my office at the Prudential would either be too hot or freezing cold. Because it was so slippery out I figured I'd take the MBTA to work so I walked down Tappan Street to Brookline Hills stop. A chickadee whistled its spring song "fee-be" and I couldn't help smiling. "You're a little early," I advised him, "best go up the street a ways — my feeders are full and the sunflower seeds are the best I can buy." Walking a little further I heard the "killy-killy" of the sparrow hawk or American kestrel. This is the smallest of our hawks, robin size,

and very beautiful with bluish wings and a rusty reddish back and tail. What can he eat in this weather with the ground snow-covered and his natural prey, mice, protected? I hoped he'd take an English sparrow rather than a chickadee. The sparrow in flocks would be easier to pick off I felt. Continuing to walk down Tappan Street I passed the unified arts building. My eyes picked up a small flock of birds in a birch tree despite dozens of students walking by. Lo and behold, they were common redpolls; a species I hadn't seen in a couple of years. The pinkish breast of a male caught my breath it was so stunning.

Moving on to the MBTA platform I heard a mockingbird and spinning around saw one on a tree on Cypress Street.

Seeing someone I knew coming toward me I beamed all over and said "*Grand day!*" Tax returns? After thirty years I could do those in my sleep.

**I** think this is the right time to start in with the slide show. First I'll show pictures of some of our good birding areas in Brookline including our sanctuaries and then I'll show you thirty birds which can be seen in Brookline. . . .

The black-crowned night heron is certainly not a graceful heron as are the egrets. If a contest were to be held for the homeliest bird in Brookline, it would be a close contest between the immature night heron, the female rose-breasted grosbeak, and the young starling. Look for the night heron around Hall's Pond. Sometimes we have it on our spring Conservation Commission walk at the Sargent estate. Occasionally one will fly over my house giving his "quok" note.

American coot is a regular visitor to the reservoir and can be found every winter in Leverett Pond. As I said earlier, it is not a duck but related indirectly to our barnyard hens.

This species of mallard in Brookline is what birders call feral, meaning a creature that has reverted from the domestic to the wild state. During the winter the mallard stays in Leverett Pond, not too proud to accept what hand-outs people proffer — most of the time they get stale bread which is all right, but cracked corn is better. In the summer most of them withdraw to nest at places such as Sargent estate, Hall's Pond, Allandale farm, and similar places.

Next comes the black duck. The black is the Atlantic coast's principal wild duck — the mallard is taking the black's place in central and western United States. I much prefer the black. Unfortunately, the mallard is the dominant species and puddle-duck mallards have escaped so they are now hybridizing freely with the blacks. Responsible ornithologists now fear that in a generation or two the black as a separate species may vanish from our avifauna.

The red-tailed hawk is a common winter hawk in Brookline and prob-

ably breeds somewhere in the Country Club area. Should you see a large hawk, somewhat bigger than a common crow circling around overhead odds are it is the red-tail.

The American kestrel, formerly called sparrow hawk, can be seen perched on a telephone wire anywhere in South Brookline. They nest at Allandale farm. It is a beautiful little beneficial falcon whose favorite food is grasshoppers.

Hairy woodpecker can be found all year round at the Hoar Sanctuary. A pair visits my suet feeders almost every winter and their loud calls are heard regularly, so I was surprised to hear a few years ago that one of the best birders in the state had gone two years without a hairy. It can be confused with the downy, but look at the length of bill. From tip of bill to where it joins head is the same in inches as from there to the back of the neck. In the downy the ratio is one to two, a field mark not mentioned in any guide.

Downy woodpecker is much more common than the hairy and is the commonest of our woodpeckers — a regular at winter suet feeders.

Eastern kingbird's scientific name tells it all, *tyrannus tyrannus*. Should you ever see a hawk or a crow in the sky being harassed by a bird around half its size it's dollars to doughnuts you've been watching a kingbird. The kingbird is a member of the flycatcher family. At least one summered at Coolidge Corner two years ago; I believe a pair nested in an American elm which, alas, fell prey to the Dutch Elm disease and when the elm was cut down the kingbirds departed.

The blue jay is a permanent resident in Brookline, but what is not generally known is that our winter blue jays are not the same ones that are here in the summer. Coastal birders in late May and late September can see blue jays migrating by the dozens, even hundreds. Some winters there are few jays around, because their principal food, acorns, are in short supply.

I have a sneaky admiration for the common crow. The hand of man has been raised against this species since the days of the Pilgrims, yet in 1979 there are more crows in Massachusetts than there were in 1679. Crows can count; often I have heard one crow give a "caw," another will "caw caw," then comes three caws. All I've heard is six in a row, nonetheless scientific papers have gone as high as ten.

The fish crow is a new visitor to Brookline. Somewhat smaller than a common crow, its voice is a better field mark, a "kaa" rather than a "caw." Beware of this after late May — fledgling common crows call "kaa" then. I've had fish crows regularly at Hoar Sanctuary, Sargent estate, and even over my house.

Black-capped chickadee is Massachusetts' state bird and a very cheery bird in winter's coldest day.

The tufted titmouse is a larger cousin of the chickadee and is one of the three southern species formerly unknown in Massachusetts but now common; the other two are cardinal and mockingbird. Titmice will come

to winter feeding stations for sunflower seeds, but alas they are very un-aggressive birds and are often pushed aside by house sparrows, starlings, jays, and house finches. In the summertime the titmice withdraw to woodlands such as Hoar Sanctuary to breed.

The white-breasted nuthatch is a favorite of mine. It is a no-nonsense bird, taking no guff from anyone.

The eastern mockingbird is another favorite of mine. Should you want a pair of mockers in your yard, plant multiflora rose along a fence; the rose will produce berries which can keep mockers alive all winter. Mockers are exuberant singers going from perfect imitations of a cardinal, wren, towhee, yellow-throat, and such esoteric sounds as lobster boat motors in Gloucester, squeaky weather vanes in Brookline, and the barking of a dog in Lynnfield. Mockers can sing all night long.

Cedar waxwings can be seen almost anywhere in Brookline in the late fall or winter where there are berry-bearing shrubs or trees. If you see one, you'll usually see several, as these birds are likely to travel in small flocks. Sometimes they'll line up on a tree limb and pass a cherry down the line from one bird to another until finally one ends the game by swallowing it. Whether this is politeness or the other birds were already stuffed to the gunnels, no one has ever figured out.

The red-eyed vireo is far more common than generally realized. The vireos move more sluggishly than do the wood warblers; the red-eyed in particular sticks closely to the heavily foliated tree tops and his coloring blends in, so it's hard to find him unless you know his song — a sort of dry, robin-like song "with all the emotion and *joie-de-vivre* squeezed out" as one birder said. Red-eyes arrive in mid-May, nest at Hoar Sanctuary and leave in September.

Yellow warbler is a common migrant and nesting bird in Brookline. Nests at places such as Sargent estate and Allandale farm.

The common yellow-throat is the other regular nesting wood warbler. This species nests near water so it can be found at Hall's Pond.

The only other warblers that may breed in Brookline other than those two are chestnut-sided warbler and American redstart and I have my doubts about both.

The house sparrow is a trash bird and shouldn't be here at all; introduced from England in 1850.

Redwinged blackbirds nest at Sargent estate, Allandale farm, and other areas. In March when the first migrants arrive, these birds are apt to show up in back yards at feeding stations.

The common grackle is another summer resident that also can pop up at a bird feeding station in March or April when a spring snow storm hits.

Brookline is certainly a more beautiful place since the cardinal moved up from the South and established itself. I have had as many as eight of this species at my bird feeder and a bright red male hopping on snow can

take your breath away.

Evening grosbeaks, another winter finch, come in droves some years and not at all others. This species normally likes more open country than Brookline, so only the larger places in South Brookline attract a flock. When a flock of forty or so does descend upon a feeder, the cost to the birder in sunflower seeds skyrockets. A friend of mine who lives in Newbury and usually attracts large flocks of this species drives to his feed store every week and without a word being spoken, the owner will plunk two fifty-pound bags of sunflower seeds and one fifty-pound bag of regular seed in his trunk. As my friend told me, "One neighbor smokes, another drinks, but my grosbeaks cost me as much as both of them put together."

Our purple finch, unfortunately, is in a severe decline. I have written an article in a scientific ornithological journal showing how, in Annisquam, my summer home, the purple finch has gone from twelve nesting pairs the year before the house finches arrived in Annisquam, to one pair, while the house finch now has a population in the twenties. The house finch is aggressive and the purple finch is passive.

House finches are an interesting story. A far western bird, it was not known in this state until the 1960s; it was first reported in Brookline in 1972. How this far western bird arrived in the east is a mystery. One theory is that a pet store owner on Long Island had some for sale and when told this was illegal let them go to avoid prosecution. It's hard to believe all our house finches come from those small beginnings. The population has exploded in recent years, and I will say the house finch is Brookline's most common species.

I said in my "Birds of Brookline," "Some years no pine siskins come, others just a few, other years they come by the dozens." Normally the last siskin leaves for the north in April.

The white-throated sparrow is a common migrant; a few will winter.

Last in my birds is the song sparrow, another of my favorites. An unassuming bird, the songy normally arrives in mid-March, although some birds winter over and the sight of one scratching away at my ground feeder gladdens my heart. This bird nests anywhere in Brookline that there are bushes and a little tangle.

At this point I feel I should stress how wonderful birding is as a hobby. It can be done all over the world, at many places around the country, the state, and in your hometown. You can bird while sailing at sea, climbing a mountain, at the seashore or in your backyard. It can be done very actively in your youth, moderately so in middle age, and passively in old age. And who can say who enjoys it the most? A new species in my backyard is greeted with as much unbridled enthusiasm as a life bird in Arizona. Unlike other hobbies which are pure pleasure and nothing else, birding, if careful and accurate records are kept, can aid science by Christmas Bird Counts, Breed-Bird Counts and the like.

Unlike other hobbies which require dues to expensive country clubs, fees and the like, birding can be quite reasonable. A basic requirement is good binoculars. While an extremely good set can cost \$400, an adequate pair can be had for \$50. Two necessary field guides are *A Field Guide to the Birds* by Roger Tory Peterson — my first choice for beginners — and *Birds of North America* by Robbins, Bruun, Zim and Singer. The latter may confuse a tyro as it shows all the country's birds, many of which would be unlikely if not impossible to find here in Massachusetts. Peterson's, on the other hand, covers the birds east of the Mississippi. The record volume accompanying the Peterson book should be purchased also since you'll want to identify the birds by song and almost all written descriptions of birds' songs are wretched at best. Ultimately you will want to purchase a spotting scope and that can be had for around \$75 or thereabouts. □

