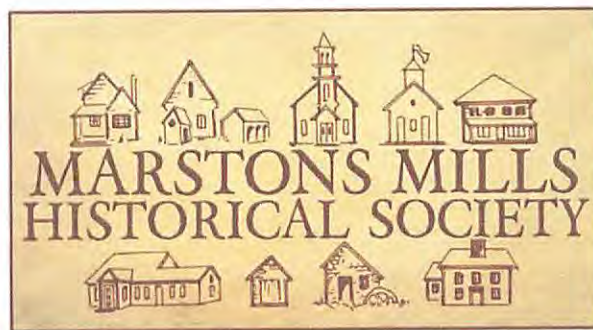


Marstons Mills Historical Society  
Interview with Sue Davenport & Joan Knowlton  
(Jim Gould & Dave Martin)  
Nov. 10, 2011



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Susan Johnson Davenport and Joan Carson Knowlton participated in a group interview on November 10, 2011. The content was amended by Sue and Joan on March 16, 2013.

**Sue:** I moved to Massachusetts from Richmond, Virginia. I had a degree in education and had developed a pre-school program there. When I came to the Cape in 1969, I first taught at the Centerville Pre-School. After a year, in the fall of 1970, I founded The Children's House pre-school at the Gifford Farm which my husband, Bob Johnson, and our three children, Sarah, Robin, and Amy Johnson and I had bought the previous summer. We bought the farm from George and Elsie Gifford for \$35,000 for four and a half acres, a slaughter house, a chicken coop, and a house. We needed a large enough place for our home and a large building to accommodate the activities, indoors and out, for a large pre-school crowd. Measurement of the land was very imprecise. George Gifford stood on the hill and described our purchase like this: "It goes from that last tree there, to that pile of rocks there, to Lovell's Lane, and along Route 149 (then known as Cotuit Road)."

Our school, The Children's House, was a success from the beginning. I understood that it was the first private pre-school on Cape Cod with an educational focus. Three- and four-year-olds were in the school. At one time we were enrolling up to 100 children per week. One of our first students was Andrew, Joan and Bill Knowlton's son. Eventually, new state physical requirements for operating a school like ours became too expensive and we closed the school in 1978. Before 1978, someone else opened the Children's Path at the Church. I had started a summer pre-school program, called Way in the Woods, at Camp Lyndon in Sandwich. The counselors lived in The Children's House in exchange for use of the Camp's cabin for the little children. My own children attended Fair Acres Day Camp in Marstons Mills.

I remember, many years after I bought the Gifford Farm, George Gifford showed up at the house and said, "I was just wondering," as he scratched his head, "if I left my hog-scraper here?" He hunted around the slaughter house but never found it (whatever a hog-scraper is.) George was a great guy, a real sweetheart.

I was President of the Marstons Mills Historical Society after it was reborn about 1982. It was re-started by several Marstons Mills citizens who were upset at so many old photographs being thrown away by elderly residents. There was also the incident when someone saw the old Marstons Mills hearse from the Cemetery hearse house being carried up Route 149 to Barnstable Village, where there was a "real" historical society, by the Town Historical Society. There was an uproar; Marstons Mills wanted it back where it belonged! The new Historical Society vowed that, "This is never going to happen again." The hearse was returned and the Men's Club rebuilt the hearse house.

I later wrote a grant proposal which was funded for \$5,000, and paid Barbara Hill to do oral histories and bought the glass cabinet in the Library. To raise more money, I also designed and the Society sold calendars featuring old photos which we had collected. I joined the Library Board and served as

president two terms in the eighties. Marstons Mills was a blue-collar community where the farmers, servants and tradespeople for the wealthy homes in Osterville and Cotuit lived.

All of this was changing with the growing population in the area. Paul Lebel, who lived in Indian Lakes, Marstons Mills, and who with his family, developed Tower Hill in Osterville, among many other prominent places in the Town of Barnstable. Paul and Deane Lawrence, at one time, proposed to build a commercial development with landscaping around Mill Pond, with high-end shopping stores, which would have enhanced Marstons Mills. It was voted down by Town Meeting.

**Joan:** I was originally from Quincy and came to Marstons Mills in 1955 when I married Bill Knowlton, who after graduating from Norfolk County Agricultural College had bought a farm in the Mills in 1948 to raise poultry. He purchased the farm from William Thew, who had given up raising chickens. Bill bought 26 acres in 1948 for only \$13,000. The mortgage payments were \$16 a month. Thew had built the house in WWII, when materials were not the best quality. The old Roseland Dance Hall, which was part of the farm, housed a lot of chickens! The back area of the farm had been used for army maneuvers.

I had graduated from Woodward School in Quincy, where Dr. Rachael Burgess also graduated. I came to the Cape to work as a medical technician at Cape Cod Hospital. I met Bill when I was working there. Bill was an usher at the Federated Church in Hyannis. When I got a call to go to the Hospital, it was Bill who drove me there from the church. Bill had lived at Mrs. Perkins' boarding house before we married. After we were married in 1955, we moved into the Thew house. Then in 1970 we built a house at the Thew Farm on Shubael's Pond on what is now known as Knowlton's Way.

At the peak, we had about 8,000 chickens – perhaps 2-3,000 laying. George and Eddie Thew worked on the farm after school and weekends, but we did most of the work. We stopped farming in the early 1970's because the cost of chicken feed had gone way up. Bill died in 1976.

Bill was known as the “mayor” of Marstons Mills because he didn't mind going to town hall to ask for things from the Selectmen, when we had that form of town government. Bill joined the Men's Club, even though he was an “outsider.” When he was living at Mrs. Perkins', he got to know the men who worked on the duck farm, the largest employer. He also helped elect political candidates, putting signs on the vehicles. He served on two charter commissions, the first and the third, and served on the Planning Board.

Town Meetings were held in Hyannis at the movie theatre, where apartments are today. There were always a few solid citizens who would tell jokes at the meetings. Bill was very vocal at Town Meetings; one of the characters who always spoke. Political issues of the day included conversions of old properties for development (such as the Nelson property), lot sizes and open space. Sometimes meetings would go on until midnight. There would be a big turnout on an issue such as kindergartens and then people would leave. Bill and Sue Johnson were Town Representatives when we gave up town meetings. Bill also worked on maintenance at the middle school.

I called on Dr. Burgess because we were graduates of the same school. An interesting story involved Dr. Burgess. She had originally been a nurse. A male doctor encouraged her and another nurse to go to Italy to study pediatrics. There if a child was born with club feet, they would bind the feet with a fine silk

thread, a job done by a nurse. Back in the U.S., male surgeons' hands were too big to perform the delicate operation, so women were asked to do it. When then Dr. Burgess was summoned to do this procedure, she had to first put on a nurses' uniform before entering the operating room at Children's Hospital. Also, when nurses were in a patient's room and a male doctor came in, the nurses had to stand aside and fold their hands behind their backs. As a woman (and doctor) she was also required to use the stairs or service elevator when going to the second floor dining room at the Harvard Club

Bill and I lived across Route 149 from the entrance to Camp Alpine. In the summers, we heard the bugle calls and all the announcements on the public address system from the Camp. Occasionally, the cows from the Fuller Farm on the west side of the road would wander over to our place to visit the chickens. We had to coax them back across the street.

One more story, the Cash Market in the village allowed customers to charge their purchases, sometimes for months on end. The Cash Market sold the Knowlton's eggs at one time.

