

HIGHTSTOWN

NEW



JERSEY

EAST WINDSOR

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWS

MARCH - APRIL 2005

The Secret Societies of Hightstown

By Richard S. Hutchinson

Uver the years, Hightstown has seen many secret organizations or societies - The Knights of Pythias; the Improved Order of Red Men - Pawnee Tribe, No. 70, Independent Order of Red Men; Independent Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F.); Hightstown Lodge, No. 41, Free & Accepted Masons; The Know Nothings; and several other organizations. Other than the Masonic Lodge, most have fallen by the wayside due to a lack of membership.

However, there is one other secret society still in Hightstown that few know little about. It is a secret organization of men who meet once a month in various locations, usually in private residences, either within the boundaries of the Borough or over into East

Windsor Township. When the society was formed, the members attending any meeting would be given instructions as to where they were to assemble the following month. All meetings were held at night. Although their rules indicate that their "proceedings" at the meetings shall not be regarded as "secret," they are. Members are instructed that the "content" of their meeting is "to be considered as confidential" among the members.

When did this organization begin and what were its origins? As difficult as these questions may seem, their answers were found rather easily recently. The original recordings of the origins of this society (that as they are) were found in a building in Hightstown. It appears that the organization was formed close to 100 hundred years ago in a dimly lit area of the what was then the Railroad Hotel, which sat opposite of what is today Stockton Street. It was on the 14th of January in 1914, when six men were contacted and asked to meet another for dinner at 7:00PM at that hotel. It is not clear who invited the six men for dinner but they sat in a secluded area of the hotel's dining room near the rear of the building. [This building was the focal point of the early history of Hightstown. It was here that insanity hearings took place, coroner's inquests, County Freeholder meetings, court trials, and many other functions. It was a place where the businessmen, from both in and out of town, would cut their deals and seal them over dinner. This building sat where Theo's Lakeside Restaurant now stands.]

The group of seven men sat unnoticed as they met for dinner. Their host, John G. Scheible, saw to it that they received the best of service, as they wine and dined, while being introduced to the concept of putting together this secret organization. Those present at the dinner meeting were - Aaron V. Dawes (lawyer), Dr. Charles M. Franklin (medical doctor), George Forman (businessman), Daniel Messler (Peddie teacher), Rev. William A. Stanton (Baptist minister), Roger W. Swetland (then Headmaster of Peddie), and Charles E. Stults (Insurance & Undertaking). From the types of businesses and organizations represented by those "summoned to dinner," it is obvious that the person responsible for organizing the group intended to include as many, if not all, of the leaders of the local community.

After their meal, they enjoyed a good cigar and a little brandy and quietly discussed their plans. It was Roger W. Swetland, Headmaster of Peddie, who

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

MARCH

- 7 Business Meeting, 7:30 p.m., Sara Hutchinson West Educational Center
- 14 "History of Carving Duck Decoys" with Jeff Eldridge, 7:30 p.m., Sara Hutchinson West Educational Center
- 21 Duck Carving Demonstration with Jeff Eldridge, 7:30 p.m., Sara Hutchinson West Educational Center

APRIL

- 4 Business Meeting, 7:30 p.m., Sara Hutchinson West Educational Center
- 17 Children related train activities at the Freight Station

Memoriam

Long Time Society Members

Henry Rudolph May, of Heber Springs, AR, age 79, died January 27th.

Elizabeth Reeves Klank, age 87, died January 29th.

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took charge of the meeting and explained its purpose. Those who wished to decline could leave if they so desired but none left. As a result, Swetland was appointed the Acting Chairman and George Forman as Secretary in order to have notes taken at this meeting. [With Swetland being made Acting Chairman that evening and with he and another member of the Peddie staff being called to the dinner, I am of the opinion that Roger W. Swetland was the one responsible for, if not the organizing force, behind the formation of this secret organization.] At this meeting, they also made a motion that the organization's meetings would always "meet on the last Monday of every month at 8:15PM" promptly. All seven of those attending the meeting were called upon to answer if they wanted "to be members." They all quietly agreed and were designated as the "charter members" of the organization. They also agreed that they would keep this organization known only to themselves. It was agreed that the Secretary would maintain a list of members listed in alphabetical order and each member would "host" the monthly meeting of the group using the list on a rotating basis, as to who would act as its "host" or chairman for that evening. Each meeting would also have another member who would be the "speaker," who would put forth a report or a concern before those present in order for them to comment upon it.

At this dinner meeting, they apparently agreed to approach others, who could be trusted, to join them. I say this because the fragments of their "minutes" list other names under the heading "were suggested." They were Walter C. Black (E. Windsor Township Tax Collector); William H. Franklin (son of Dr. George H. Franklin); Dr. George H. Franklin (medical doctor & father of Charles and William); Forman A. Updike (businessman & cousin to George Forman); R.H. Rivenburg (Ass't Headmaster of Peddie); Dr. William Lloyd Wilbur (medical doctor); and Dr. George E. Titus (medical doctor). They then passed a motion that if these "suggested" men were ap-

proached, and "if these gentlemen will associate themselves with us," they will also be made charter members. They then selected which of those among them would approach these prospective members for their organization. Dr. Charles M. Franklin was given G.H. Franklin and W.H. Franklin; Charles E. Stults - Forman A. Updike; Aaron V. Dawes - Dr. Wm. L. Wilbur; Rev. Wm. A. Stanton - Dr. George E. Titus; Roger W. Swetland - Walter C. Black; and Daniel Messler - R.H. Rivenburg. Before leaving the hotel that evening, they elected Dr. Charles M. Franklin to be the "host" and Dr. Rev. William A. Stanton to be the "speaker" at the next meeting, which would be held at Dr. Franklin's residence on the 26th of January.

At the January 26th meeting, the fragmented minutes reflect that they had apparently contacted the suggested members mentioned above. Their names were listed with cryptic notations behind their names. Behind F. A. Updike's name 1-4 X no reply. All of the others had "ch" and a number from 1 to 9 behind their names. At this meeting, the original seven members voted to limit the number of members to 20. They then accepted the following persons into their midst - T. [Tracy] H. Dawes, Mark Swetland, and Prof. Phares H. Hertzog (Peddie teacher).

At the February meeting, they met at the home of Charles E. Stults. Present were - A.V. Dawes, George Forman, Dr. G.H. Franklin, P.H. Hertzog, D. Messler, R.H. Rivenburg, W.A. Stanton, R.W. Swetland and Chas. E. Stults. Certain rules were established; such as after the "speaker" finishes with his topic, each member may only have five minutes to respond in any way to what was said. After all of those present have responded, then the "speaker" has ten minutes to respond to the comments or to answer any criticisms. The members agreed to collect \$.25 per member at each meeting and also agreed that any member of the society, "who does not come to a meeting nor make a positive reply, by the

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HIGHTSTOWN EAST WINDSOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Hightstown, New Jersey
founded 1971

609-371-9580

**To educate, while preserving for
future generations, our people
and our community's history.**

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the Hightstown-East Windsor Town-
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printed as space allows.**

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3rd meeting after his election, shall be considered as having declined" to participate further. Rev. Stanton, Aaron V. Dawes and Daniel Messler were appointed to draft By-Laws for the society and have them ready by the next meeting.

The By-Laws of the organization were presented at the next meeting and one has to assume that they were adopted. However, the fragmented minutes do not reflect a vote or an outcome of them. Some of the highlights of the proposed By-Laws were:

1. Membership shall not exceed 20 members.

2. Nominations shall be by ballot and at least a month before a vote is taken.

3. The secretary shall make no record of the nomination or rejection of anyone who might fail being elected.

4. No conference to be held with the person to be proposed for membership until after being nominated and then officially being notified by an appointee.

5. The society is to meet at night at 8:15PM on the last Monday of each month, except the months of July & August.

6. The Chairman or "host" at each meeting will call the meeting to order at 8:25PM, at 8:45PM the "speaker" is to make his presentation, then any comments and discussion, at 10:15PM - Refreshments.

7. "Proceedings at the meetings shall not be regarded as secret but should be considered as confidential among the members. Personalities in business or discussion shall always be ruled out of order..."

The last minutes located by this writer were for the year 1919 but they only reflect the names of those members who paid dues. It also showed that the dues had gone up to \$.50 from 1916-1919. The names of those members for those years were:

A.V. Dawes, T.H. Dawes, George Forman, R.R. Forman, C.M. Franklin - notation died 1918, G.H. Franklin, P.H. Hertzog, F.V. Jemison, D. I. Messler, R.H. Rivenburg, W.A. Stanton, M.W.

Swetland, W.H. Thompson, J.W. West, H. D. Winters, W.L. Wilbur, J.W. Reeves, C.J. Keeler, R.E. Harmon - came in 1918, Rev. T. Tyack - came in 1919, H.R. Applegate - came in 1919.

Today, this secret organization still meets monthly in the town or local area.

I have learned that the organization's membership today is strictly limited to 24. I have also learned that the organization still functions under the "rules of tradition" that were established at that first dinner meeting in 1914. However, I am told that from time to time some variations have occurred regarding "tradition" but not without the "admonishment" of some of its oldest members for violating the rules. There are specific "refreshments" required at every monthly gathering of its 24 members. There must be mixed peanuts, apple pie with vanilla ice cream, coffee and tea, with after dinner mints. Today, this secret society's meetings are still held in member's homes at that special time. Each meeting begins with the "host" giving some history of their home and family relationships to those who have entered for their monthly gathering.

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Join today, become a member!

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Annual Membership Application (January - December)

☐ Individual ☐ Family ☐ Booster/Patron
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Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Home Phone Number: _____

Please mail the completed application, along with a check made payable to the Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society to:

Membership Committee
Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society
164 North Main Street
Hightstown, NJ 08520

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During my research on this secret organization for this article, I was afforded unprecedented access to the above earliest minutes of the organization. However, with the society still in existence today, access to their recent minutes and the topics of their discussions could not be divulged. It was only under the promise not to divulge the names of current members to all non-members that I was granted access to these early fragmented minutes.

So, if you see a "gathering" of men at a residence in the Borough at night on the last Monday of the month, you will know that this secret organization is gathering. For their privacy, I have been asked not to divulge the identity the organization.

*2005 Annual Dinner***Molly Pitcher Book Available**

From all conversations, the Annual Dinner Meeting and Dr. David Martin's program on his new book, Molly Pitcher, went very well. Dr. Martin has advised me that those interested in purchasing a copy of the book can order it from Longstreet House, PO Box 730, Hightstown, NJ 08520 with free shipping for H-EW Historical Society members. Price is \$30. Copies are also available at Old Hights Print Shop, Hightstown.



One of the several tables of members enjoying themselves at the Society's Annual Dinner Meeting.

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