

2014 Hamilton History

January

Jan. ?? - New Barber Shop. The ?? barbershop, formerly located at 300 Main St., Wenham, moved over to Hamilton. Steve ??, the owner, bought ?? Bay Rd. and remodeled the ground floor.

February

Feb. 20 - Four-alarm fire leaves two homeless in Hamilton

Salem News, Terri Ogan.

A four-alarm fire tore through a single-family home on Bridge Street in South Hamilton yesterday afternoon, displacing the two adults who live there.

No injuries were reported, and the residents, Fred and Gay Hammond, were able to save their two cairn terriers, along with a few paintings.

Firefighters responded to 279 Bridge St. at 3:41 p.m. and found heavy fire in the basement and throughout the two-story home, said Hamilton fire Chief Philip Stevens. The flames eventually spread through the residence and broke through the roof of the house.

Stevens said smoke was coming out of the chimney, and fighting the blaze took an extended period of time, about five hours, because of the cold weather. In addition, Stevens said, the way the house was built allowed the flames to shoot right up through the walls.

Firefighters were pulled out of the home shortly after arriving due to unsafe conditions.

"It got to a point where it was getting dangerous," Stevens said. "We needed heavier streams to fight from outside. Fire was in the walls."

Pamela Scotti, 27, who lives next door to the now-destroyed home, said she saw smoke coming toward her house around 4 p.m., then saw fire trucks on the street.

Scotti said she rushed over, concerned for her neighbors.

"I grew up next door to them," Scotti said. "I wanted to make sure they were OK and their two puppies were OK."

The Hamilton Fire Department notified the American Red Cross Disaster Action Team's dispatch center in Cambridge of the blaze, and members came to the scene to assist those displaced.

"This time of year, fires happen much too frequently," said Steven Hatch, the Disaster Action Team's supervisor. "With space heaters, fireplaces and things like that."

Hatch added that depending on the

situation, his team will find a hotel room for the displaced residents and put them up for a few nights.

The team also helps with other immediate needs. Those dislodged are sometimes issued a temporary credit card with an amount of money specific to their needs.

The house on Bridge Street, which was built in 1923 and valued at about \$264,000 according to Assessors Online Database, was a "total loss," Stevens said.

Stevens added that this was Hamilton's fourth fire in two weeks.

The Hamilton Fire Department received mutual aid from Beverly, Boxford, Topsfield, Ipswich, Manchester, Essex and Danvers.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation.

March

Mar. 3 - Hamilton and Wenham to combine some public works functions,

Salem News, Jonathan Phelps.

The towns of Hamilton and Wenham are moving forward with options for combining certain public works functions after receiving a \$90,000 state grant.

Wenham Town Administrator Mark Andrews said the grant allows the two towns to implement aspects of a study looking into combining the services. While a full report from the Collins Center for Public Management provides options for all public works, the towns still need to decide what will be combined.

The plan right now calls for merging the facilities and infrastructure functions of both towns and the regional school department.

"We are going to be buying hardware, software and IT support to link the three entities with the \$90,000 grant," Andrews said.

The \$90,000 grant came from the state's Community Innovation Challenge, which encourages regionalization. Last year, the towns were awarded \$30,000 to hire the Collins Center.

Ken Whittaker, chairman of the Wenham Board of Selectmen, said this will be the first public facilities and infrastructure department in the state.

"The towns of Hamilton and Wenham have a rich history of sharing precious municipal resources," he said.

Wenham Selectman Patrick Wilson said the move will save the town money.

"The school district and the towns

are committed to moving forward to design and implement a new paradigm from the management of all public facilities, infrastructure, ground maintenance, including routine and preventative building maintenance, capital repairs and overall infrastructure improvements," he said.

Mar. 22 - After 64 years, Mac's Shoe Repair to close,

Salem News, Ethan Forman

When you walk into Mac's Shoe Repair at 63 Willow St., a bell rings letting the cobbler, working at noisy machines out back, know that one of his loyal customers is out front.

After March 31, that bell will no longer ring. Robert McRae, the town's former fire chief, has decided to close shop after 64 years. He opened the shop in 1950.

"That's what I'm going to miss, my faithful customers," said McRae, who is 88. "... I am sorry to give it up, but my body just tells me I've got to quit."

Out back, McRae shows off the heavy shoe repair equipment he bought new when he opened. There's the finishing, sewing and roughing-up machines, the heel wheel, the splitter and others. The machines nail on heels; trim, pound and stitch soles; and polish leather. The cash register is vintage 1950s.

"It's time," said son Mike McRae, who lives in Maryland. "His health is starting to be compromised now."

Mike McRae, 59, knows from experience that shoe repair requires a lot of upper-body strength; he worked at the shop as a teenager. "He has put in a lifetime of achievement and he just needs to back off and enjoy retirement."

Besides, there is little money in shoe repair nowadays, the elder McRae said. The shop's heyday was in the 1980s.

"It's a dying business, I think. I get communications from the national people and they tell how great it is, but I don't see it that way with the way shoes are made nowadays," he said.

Shoes are so inexpensive they may not be worth repairing. Many can't be resoled, he said.

Setting up shop in a small town meant business was slow at first.

"It took a while before I could begin to earn a decent week's wage," he said.

McRae was born in a home on Maple Street. In 1976, he moved a half-mile away to the house behind his shop with

his first wife, Eva. She died in 1998, and his second wife, Shirley Burke, died about two years ago.

During World War II, he served with the U.S. Navy's construction force, known as the Seabees, from 1943 to 1946. He was stationed in the Aleutian Islands, off the coast of Alaska, and he and others worked to keep roads and airports open.

"No action, which I'm very thankful for," McRae said, "because I'm here in one piece."

After the war, when he decided he wanted to open a shoe shop, McRae worked for Fred Turcotte in Salem for four years before striking out on his own.

McRae's other job was as a call firefighter from 1950 to 1991. His last 10 years on the department he served as chief. The pay, he said, was minimal.

"I just liked it," he said, "It was a challenge."

He recalled responding to the Salem Armory and Masonic Temple arson fires in 1982. On the wall of the shop is a photo of him standing with other North Shore chiefs at the Ipswich block fire in 1982.

When an alarm came in during the day, he would close his shop and respond to the fire.

McRae is the father of two sons. His eldest, Wayne, died when he was 30 in 1979. McRae keeps photos of Wayne's three grown sons, Scott, Shaun and Glen, on the wall in the shop, along with pictures of his son Mike's family and 11 great-grandchildren.

"I am proud to say I did good work," McRae said of his work in the shop. "I used to do riding boots for people all over the North Shore. I used to take them in and let them out and resole them, all different things. I had a lot of customers even from as far away as Vermont and Maine and New Hampshire, because there were not too many repair shops that would work on riding boots at that time."

When his hands could no longer repair riding boots, he referred customers to Richie Gagnon, owner of Gagnon's Shoe Repair in Salem.

"It's going to be a sad day when he closes because he was an institution," said Gagnon.

To stay in business, many cobblers have had to diversify. Gagnon specializes in orthopedic and shoe modifications. McRae worked on ice skates. Central Shoe Repair in Ipswich specializes in

clogs, Gagnon said.

McRae has sold his property, including the store, but will stay in his home and rent it from the new owners.

What will happen to his trusty shoe repair machines?

"If they junk them, they junk them, I don't care," McRae said. "Nothing I can do with them."

April

Apr. 8 - Hamilton Town Meeting moves to develop Patton Homestead

Salem News, Alan Burke
Saturday's Town Meeting decided to take no action on the plan to rehab Patton Park pool, but it gave a go-ahead for the selectmen to sell, develop or place restrictions on the Patton Homestead property for the purpose of building 12 moderately priced homes.

"Everything went well," said Town Clerk Jane Wetson of the meeting. "Everything passed."

On the agenda was a plan to reduce the size of the Hamilton-Wenham Regional School Committee from nine to seven members, which was approved. Also given the OK was \$550,000 for new vehicles for the Department of Public Works and telephone equipment, among other things.

A citizen's petition to use free cash for a 2.5-mile recreation trail along Essex Street was also approved. Likewise, community preservation spending for things like handicapped-accessible bathrooms at the senior center and renovating the American Legion building was approved.

Apr. 11 - Hubbard re-elected in Hamilton; Harrison ousts Wilson in Wenham

Salem News, John Castelluccio
Hamilton Selectman Jeff Hubbard won another three-year term yesterday, according to unofficial results, by a close margin — 19 votes — over challenger Shawn Farrell in a race that became heated at times. Meanwhile, in Wenham, Catherine Harrison ousted incumbent Selectman Patrick Wilson, based on ballot returns.

"It was a message from the community that they are expecting leadership to be all-inclusive of our entire community, even when there are differing opinions," Hubbard said, reflecting on the results. He said his goal is to refocus on fundamentals and a "commonsense approach to some of the larger issues we're look-

ing at, like the pool, turf field and the Patton property."

Hubbard, who works in the reverse mortgage industry and moved to town with his family several years ago, was first elected to the Board of Selectmen in 2011 and often found himself the lone vote among his colleagues on various spending issues.

There didn't appear to be any bitter feelings as Hubbard and Farrell, each with their families by their side, shook hands soon after the results were announced at Winthrop School. Farrell told The Salem News, however, that he's definitely considering running for office again.

The final tally, according to unofficial results, was 513-494.

"I think Hamilton had a good turnout today, and it was a close one. I think we knew from the beginning that it was going to be a close race, and the toughest part has just been kind of getting my name out there since I'm kind of a newcomer," Farrell said. "So, I'm pretty happy, not as happy as I could be with the result, but happy enough."

Harrison, thanking supporters and campaign staff, said in a brief statement that she wishes the best to Wilson and praised him for making positive contributions to Wenham. She said she looks forward to working with her new colleagues on the Board of Selectmen. Yesterday's race was decided 466-341. Harrison is a former member of the Hamilton-Wenham Regional School Committee, the Finance Committee, and she has also served on other town boards and with local organizations. Wilson was first elected in 2011 and previously served on the town Conservation Commission and Community Preservation Committee.

The only other contested race in Hamilton was for a seat on the Housing Authority. Theresa Mimi Fanning defeated Leigh Keyser, 486-272.

In uncontested races, regional school board members William Dery and Roger Kuebel won re-election, while Stacey Metternick and Lawrence Swartz won two open seats on the board. Diane Buco was elected as Wenham Town Clerk on a write-in campaign.

Wenham's voter turnout for the day was 30 percent.

Election results

Hamilton Selectman
Jeff Hubbard* 513
Shawn Farrell 494

Wenham Selectman
Catherine Harrison 466
Patrick Wilson* 341

May