

# The South Danvers Observer

The South Danvers Observer is published quarterly.

Written and published by Nancy Barthelemy

## Inside this issue:

<b>The Devil's Dishful</b>	2
<b>The Haunted Steeple</b>	2
<b>Awful Calamity! Entire Destruction of Railroad!</b>	3
<b>From Near and Far</b>	4

*"Such an event as the remarkable caving of the earth in the front yard of the Old South Church, making a vast chasm, 38 feet wide and 40 or 50 feet deep, could not but create an intense feeling of astonishment and alarm among our citizens. . . We are not prepared to give a reason for the sudden sinking of such a mass of earth, unless the action of an underground current of water, seeking a more direct passage from Goldthwait's Brook to the Mill Pond could have produced it."*

From the April 1, 1863  
South Danvers Wizard

## The Great Chasm of 1863

Winter, 1866—Now that the terrible war which divided our country is at long last over, it is time to turn our minds and hearts to less serious pursuits.

The sharing of stories, both tall and true, can warm many a winter evening. But when these stories hale from our own backyard, then they have the ability to remind us of the interesting and unique people who have made our town the place it is today.

Only a few short years ago, a story appeared in our sister publication, *The South Danvers Wizard*, which caused some consternation among our residents.

It was on April 1, 1863 that the report came of a horrendous occurrence within our town. It might have been a disaster of epoch proportions, except for the fact that no one was apparently injured by the event.

Just how a chasm could have opened up before one of our town's most beloved and well-known landmarks, the Old South Church, no one could imagine.

Speculation was rampant as to the cause. And though word spread and dozens of people flocked to the downtown, both curious and alarmed with the news, there were some who took the more thoughtful approach. They read—and reread—the

first sentence of the article announcing the chasm's arrival and perceived it for what it truly was.

As for those of us less wise, we considered the various reasons given for such a caving in of the ground as quite reasonable. Perhaps the shaking from the nearby railroad truly had jarred the surface enough to cause the earth to collapse. Or it might have been true, that a subterranean river could have created the chasm. Certainly, all are aware of the power of water in shaping and reshaping our land.

Whatever the reason for a chasm to have appeared in such an unlikely place, many hastened downtown to the Old South Church with the hope that they could view such an stupendous occurrence which would allow them to see "the different strata of earth on the sides, showing how much the land has been raised by successive filling up."

But what did people discover upon their arrival?

Not only were they disappointed to learn that there was no chasm anywhere within sight, but they also realized what those with a more discerning nature already had.

That the editor of the

*Wizard*—and a man with a reputation as one of New England's great humorists—had played an April Fool's joke upon the unsuspecting.

While there were those who found the discovery disappointing, the excitement caused by such a harmless trick alleviated, if only for a day or so, a bleak and oppressive time in our country's history.



The Old South Church, site of the "Chasm of 1863!"

*"We are glad to find that the disappointment did not cause any ill-nature, and on the whole, it is better not to have the hole, on account of the cost of filling it up. Anybody who would take serious offense at such a harmless affair, would be likely to be considered less an April fool than a natural one."*

From the April 8, 1863  
South Danvers Wizard

## The Devil's Dishful

Though it does seem that few will own to the fact that they live in the part town called the "Devil's Dishful," the legend of how this area came to be known by such a name is one that has been tossed about for some years. One explanation came from a story which was told in the *History of Danvers* by J. W. Hanson, published in 1848.

According to his sources, a party of young people were enjoying themselves while they husked corn in their barn. But when they were called in for supper, lo and behold, they discovered that the bricks of their oven had been removed and their meal stolen.

The thieves made off with their ill-gotten gain to an old abandoned shack. Before they could fill their bellies, though, they were alarmed by the sound of someone attempting to enter the cottage. In their terror, they abandoned everything and—missing the irony of the situation—hastened away to inform the family from which they had stolen their food that someone had dared interrupt their meal.

Together, they approached the dilapidated hut, apparently with a great amount of trepidation and managed to catch a glimpse of who was within. It was merely the former owner, now returned home,

but in their fright, they saw a man with horns and hooves and were convinced it was Satan Himself, smacking his lips with pleasure, and, according to Hanson, "only a dishful of pumpkin pie was left on the table by the greedy Devil."

How much of this tale is true, we'll never know. All we can be certain is that the Dishful does include Brookdale and the Woolen Mills, as well as various neighboring regions that people will only reluctantly acknowledge.

While the borders of the area might be in dispute, and the tale no doubt exaggerated through the years of its telling, another story published in a June 1860 edition of the *Boston Evening Gazette* announced that there was something quite remarkable to be found in the Dishful.

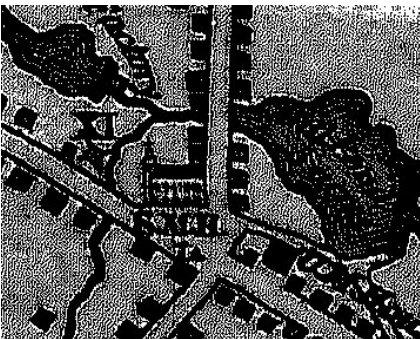
An ice cream spring!

Even more astounding, according to the *Gazette*, is that it runs vanilla in the morning, sarsaparilla at noon, and lemon, pineapple and raspberry throughout the afternoon.

No evidence of such a spring has been found, as of yet. But, be assured, if it does exist, this editor will not rest until she finds it!

*"This locality is more widely known than many imagine. A few years since, a letter came to our Post Office, from England, with simple direction, 'Devil's Dishful, America,' and the name of the person to whom it was addressed. It came via Boston and was promptly forwarded here. We would like to know the true origin of the name. We may print at some future time a story founded on one interpretation of its origin."*

*From the January 4, 1860  
South Danvers Wizard*



Site of the Original  
Old South Meeting House

*"The meeting-house we have been speaking of was situated on a plat of land bounded on two sides by two roads, and a small stream of water running on the other two sides, marked the remaining boundary."*

From "The Haunted Steeple" by Fitch Poole in the  
March 21, 1860

## The Haunted Steeple

It is the tales of the unexplained which catch and hold on our imaginations, refusing to release us until we find some explanation for events, which would be quite unbelievable, were it not for our senses telling us different.

Such is the tale of the Haunted Steeple. Not many years after the Witch hysteria, the original Meeting House was built in what was then known as the Middle Parish. Because not enough money had been raised, the parishioners had to wait a few years before they could build the steeple.

When the funds were at last available, people were thrilled with the prospect of finally having a steeple for their church.

No sooner did they begin, however, than a great storm blew up, making it impossible for the men to erect the structure. They had to retire for the day in disappointment. Another day was set

aside for the work, but, yet again, a thunderstorm descended upon them, pelting them with hail until they were forced to stop.

Even stranger, the minister's cow was struck and killed by lightning during this very same storm. There were those who felt that dark forces were working against them. And though the steeple was finally raised, it was at the cost of the life of one of the carpenters.

In later years, the bell grew silent when the tongue disappeared. Despite many insisting that it was the work of mischievous boys, there were those who felt that evil spirits were once again at work.

And throughout the ensuing years, there have been more than a few who have reported on the numerous creaks and groans which continue to plague this steeple and who believe they are caused by spirits who have found no place to rest.

## Awful Calamity! Entire Destruction of Railroad!

*"It becomes our painful duty to record one of the greatest calamities that ever befell our village and town. . . . We can only say that the entire line of Railroad between Salem and Malden is utterly destroyed, with all its depots, cars and locomotives, and we have reason to fear, with loss of life. . . . We are at this moment only able to state that the whole road has sunk into the earth and scarce a vestige remains. . . . There has been a great destruction of life as well as property. It seems that the disaster happened on the day appointed for a trial of the road, and that all the directors, engineers, ticket and baggage masters, the superintendent, clerk and treasurer were in the cars, and have by this sad event come to an untimely end!"*

In the April 18, 1846

With three train lines now passing through our town, as well as the Horse railroad at our convenience, it may stretch our memories some to recall the years when the mere hope of witnessing the arrival of a railroad line seemed out of reach.

For those who do remember that time, they must also recall the old *Danvers Courier* and its satire of the Eastern Railroad's efforts to maintain their monopoly.

When it was reported that the entire railroad between Salem and Malden had been destroyed, by an apparent collapse of the earth, we turned our roving eye upon a familiar humorist for the source of this amusing tale.

The article in the *Courier* called the railroad's demise **accidental murder** or **suicide by hanging by parallel lines**. The court disagreed and the Directors of the Eastern Railroad were charged with murder. The Honorable Rufus Choate acted as prosecutor and Elias Hasket Derby acted for the defense. A plea of "Not Guilty" was entered and witnesses were sworn in.

Though both attorneys conducted themselves in a dignified manner, the testimony proceeded something like this:

"Are you the bell ringer of the Eastern Railroad?"

"I be."

"Have you heard the evidence of the last witness in relation to 'blowing up' the Malden Railroad by two trains—and will you confirm it by stating whether you gave the signal for those trains?"

"I did. I rung the bell on the high scientific notes. I played Ole Bull's *Prairie* and *Niagara*."

"How far can your bell be heard?"

"That depends on who rings it."

"Well, when you ring it yourself?"

"About six mile when the sun shines. *I* can hear it twelve mile off when I ring it myself. . . . That aint all I can do. I can lift myself up ten inches from the ground in a basket and I can bite my left ear—that is, I can *eny most* do it."

**BUT** when this same witness was re-examined the next day, he "never said he could bite his left ear. Don't believe anybody can do it. Never said he could lift himself in a basket ten inches high—has lifted himself six inches from the ground in that manner when he was

younger. Cannot do it now."

And so on when the trial.

How a verdict was arrived at with such nonsense part of the testimony is a credit to each and every one of those steadfast jurors.

And when the foreman stood to proclaim the Directors of the Eastern Railroad Corporation, **GUILTY**, the Chief Justice had no choice but to proclaim sentence, "that you severally be taken to the prison whence you came and on the 31st of April, between the hours of one and four o'clock in the afternoon, be taken from thence and carried to the place of execution, where you will be hung by the neck until you are *dead*, **DEAD, DEAD!**"

Lest it be feared that mercy suffered the same fate as the Directors of the Eastern Railroad, we are glad to report that a reprieve came just as the nooses had been tightened about these men's necks and the hoods lowered over the heads of the condemned. The crowd gathered on Gallows Hill had hushed in expectation, waiting for the moment when "the cord would be cut that would sever them from this state of existence!"

"*Reprieve, Reprieve, Reprieve*" came the cry from the messenger on horseback. The reason for the pardon? It was believed that the act was committed while the men were in a "state of *somnambulism*."

It did not take much effort to prove that these men were asleep when they caused the death of the Malden Railroad, as many, including those who work for the East Boston Railroad and the Essex Railroad, can in all truth report, that these men have been completely asleep when they walked into them. In addition, we have it on trusted word that these Directors also had the power to put others to sleep!

According to our source, "it has been known that some people who have been quite active in opposition to their measure have been suddenly put very quietly to sleep—sometimes for a year or more as the case may be, and sometimes for *life!*"



South Danvers Train Station  
**Alive and well!**

## From Near and Far

"There is a bank of snow on Andover Street, near Felton's corner, full seven feet high! It is in the middle of the street, and so solid, that if it does not melt away, it will stand there till dog-days. It was originally several feet higher, and it settles very slowly. All the sunny days, warm rains and drying winds we have had, seem to have made little impression upon it. We intend to make it another visit sometime next summer."

From the *South Danvers Wizard*  
April 17, 1861

"The papers come to us from all quarters with accounts of the trembling of the earth, with noise somewhat similar, yet unlike distant thunder. So many accounts from such distant points and all agreeing so perfectly as to the time when the thing took place render it quite certain that it was really an earthquake. It was noticed by many y in this place and generally supposed to be thunder, although it seemed different and unlike the usual effect of his phenomenon.'

From *Danvers Courier*

"We are glad to see that our friends at the head of Central St. about restoring this ancient landmark at the junction of Central, Andover and Liberty streets, that is so far as they can do it by planting *another* tree. That old Pine Tree is associated in our minds by many earlier recollections—not that we ever saw it, for it was long gone before our time—but its *name* remained, and like that of the good man, it is better than 'precious ointment.'

From the *Danvers Courier*  
October 18, 1845

"The celestial wanderer, now seen in north-western sky, came upon us quite suddenly. Sunday and Monday nights were cloudy, and on Tuesday evening it appeared in great brilliancy, to the astonishment of all star-gazers. Had it been clear on Sunday evening, it would probably have been then seen faintly visible near the horizon. It is likely also that on Saturday a careful observer might have seen part of its luminous train, but it would appear like an electric cloud. Each succeeding evening it rises from the horizon, according to our own observation, a space about equal to the distance of the stars from each other in the handle of the "Dipper." If it should be visible a few days longer, it would leave that constellation, the "Great Bear" far behind. It is now receding from the earth, and its light grows less brilliant from night to night and it will soon disappear."

From the July 10, 1861 *South Danvers Wizard*

"Quite an excitement was raised last Friday morning by the appearance of a rabid dog who attacked and bit several other dogs, until he was killed by Mr. William S. Osborne. We believe the other dogs, which were known to be attacked, have also been killed. We hope this alarm will cause the provisions of the dog law to be strictly enforced. The dog above referred to was a stranger dog, and has never before been seen among us. This circumstance has led some persons to suspect that he was the veritable balloon dog sent down by M.r Paulin and that his madness was occasioned by his perilous descent from such a dizzy height. We have as yet no intelligence of the parachute.

From the *South Danvers Wizard*  
July 11, 1860

"We are informed by Gen. Foster, that six large rattle-snakes have been killed in his neighborhood during the past summer. Two were killed some two months since, by two women who were in the pastures picking berries. One having *twelve rattles*, was killed last Wednesday by Mr. J. W. Harrod. But the largest was killed last week, by Mr. Wm. Very, which on opening, was found to contain *eighty young rattlesnakes alive!!* When Mr. Very first saw the snake, the young ones were all out, playing around her, but upon notice of his approach, the old snake opened her mouth and the young all ran down her throat. We have not the slightest reason to doubt the truth of this, although it surpasses many of the *manufactured* snake stories."

From the *Danvers Courier*

"Our was evidently a *young* earthquake and shook the earth but gently. It however rung the doorbells, shook the beds and their occupants, rattled the doors and windows, and gave other tokens of its presence."

From the *South Danvers Wizard*  
October 24, 1860

"The eclipse in South Danvers, we are sorry to say did not give universal satisfaction. It came with praiseworthy punctuality, bit a little bit out of the top of the sun and then made a half-moon of it. Everybody was on the look-out for the darkness, but there was none visible to the naked eye. The fowls refused to go to roost when the eclipse came on and the cocks wouldn't crow when it went off. People smutted their noses and strained their eyes for nothing. Some declared it a humbug and a sham—others said it was intervention half carried out.

From the *South Danvers Wizard*  
July 25, 1860