



# RICHMOND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter - JUNE 2018

Volume 40: No. 2

Message from D. G. Johnson, President, RHS  
Before moving to Carolina Village 11 years ago, wife, Roxanne and I lived in South Kingstown for 37 years. We often passed Biscuit City Road in Kingston and wondered about the origin of the name. Upon arrival in Richmond, we discovered another road named Biscuit City. While going through the RHS archives looking for materials for the Richmond Heritage Trail, I came across the following letter written to Lucy Tootell, founder and first president of the RHS. It is an interesting letter which gives a clue to the naming of **Biscuit City Rd. in Kenyon.**

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Kenyon RI July 17, 1968

My dear Lucy -

Subject: BISCUIT CITY, KENYON, RI

Whatever information you receive from me will be stories told to me or in my presence.

Years ago- when the Kenyon Mill wove cotton & worsted cloth and help came from other towns and mills they were called tramp weavers. These workers were highly skilled and while they did not stay long in one place there was always a weaving job found for them because of their skill.

They banded together and found shelter under one of the bridges when they first entered town and later when they found work they were taken in the boarding house, then(er) was a boarding house in every small town. \$5.00 weekly - room, board, washing, and sometimes there would be one that would become known as the star boarder - I guess he had privileges. Anyway, when they entered Kenyon they came here riding the rods under a freight train or a passenger train - of course it was a dangerous way to ride, very few lost their lives or were insured at that time. Maybe it was a way of life.

Biscuit City got its name as I hear it -there would be three or four of these men and after they had washed, shaved, and cleaned up, one of them would be chosen to look the good situation over- so the system was to go to the different homes and the chosen one would notice the house where smoke was coming out of the chimney there for some wife was making breakfast for their men folk

to give them strength for the days work - a sixty hour week - \$9.00 or \$12.00 - sometimes a little more.

Anyway those wives always made biscuits for breakfast and when one of the tramps came looking for food they usually received stale biscuits from the previous day - any day and every day it was biscuits, biscuits, biscuits. This is how Biscuit City got its name.

One day early in the AM one of the tramps went to one of the houses where smoke was coming out of a chimney and as it was nearly breakfast time and after knocking on the door and when the good wife opened the door, the tramp weaver said he was hungry and for God's sake would she give him something to eat? She gave him some hard biscuits from the previous day. After he looked at them he said "Lady, for Christ's sake, will you put some butter on them?" This is the way I hear it. - James Murtagh

## Biscuit City in Kingston Village

Alicia G. Vaandering, Collection Manager, South County History Center sent along a couple of references related to my quest. One is from the **Rhode Island: A Guide to the Smallest State, 1937 American Writers Series.** Page 374 is quoted in part as follows:

"About 0.5 m, southwest of the village center is BISCUIT CITY or Harley's Mill. According to tradition and as recorded in the 'Jonny Cake Papers' the origin of the name came from the imagination of an itinerant peddler who was impressed by the many biscuits being made by the housewives.

The village never seems to have had more than six houses and a mill, grouped around the 'Great Spring' and a mill pond. A cotton mill was opened here in 1808 and later (about 1830) converted into a grist mill. At present, the pond is used as an auxiliary for water supply to Kingston; Biscuit City today has but two houses and memories."

The other reference is a Westerly Sun article dated 8 Feb 2017 by Steven Slosberg entitled "Double Order of Biscuits in RI Roads". Slosberg's discovery of two Biscuit City roads located on both sides of the Great Swamp piqued his interest. His research into the matter indicated that "by weight of anecdotal evidence, Biscuit City road in Kingston has primacy." In fact, the Charlestown Biscuit City Road which actually used to begin in Kenyon (part of Richmond) before being cut off by Amtrak was earlier and for some time called Zachary Bridge Road. According to the state Historical Preservation Commission's 1981 survey of historic and architectural resources in Charlestown; "Biscuit City Road, once known as Zachary Bridge Road, is one of the town's oldest. It is an extension of a 17<sup>th</sup> century highway which was laid out from Tower Road Settlement to Worden Pond in South Kingstown in 1668." So, there you have it. The common theme is the making of biscuits by the housewives of two towns. In the early days of Kingston, peddlers were quickly dismissed during biscuit making time. At a later time in Kenyon Village, Richmond, newly arrived itinerant mill workers were sustained with hard, day-old biscuits. The Murtagh letter represents an important historical document which gives insight into the naming of Biscuit City Road in Kenyon and Charlestown.

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**Annual Meeting of the Society is scheduled for 6:30 PM, Thursday, 21 June 2018 in the Meeting Room, Clark Lib.**

Board Nominations for next year are:

President: Richard Wolke

Vice President: Kristine Chambers

Secretary: Johanna Wolke

Treasurer: Carolyn Richard

Members at-large: to be determined

New Publication

"Richmond RI Historical Cemeteries"

by Laurie Arruda

Book signing by the Author:

Where: Bell School House

When: 16 June 2018, 1-3 PM