

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR VILLAGE HALL



*The Beecher-Hand House after 1860. Post Office on left.*

**The Beecher/Hand House**

**86 Main Street  
East Hampton New York**



# A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR VILLAGE HALL

## The Beecher/Hand House

by Averill D. Geus

Our "new" village hall is over 200 years old and was built in the mid-18th century when East Hampton was a plain remote farming village. Its shingled houses were almost all of the lean-to variety, described in later years as having the shape of a salt box. Size was the only deviation in uniformity. Each house featured a central chimney and stood behind a picket fence. In front of these houses were untidy woodpiles.

Farm animals were much in evidence as the Main Street we know today was then the village common, a stretch of green turf about three hundred feet wide, through the center of which ran narrow ruts worn by wagons and the feet of horses. There were almost no trees except for a short row of stiff Lombardy poplars and one great elm. There were no orchards or flowering shrubs. It was believed that fruit trees could not grow near salt water. There were also no stores or a post office.

In the village lived a physician, Dr. Samuel Hutchinson. Although born in Southold, his mother was Mary Dominy, the daughter of Nathaniel Dominy II of East Hampton. After the death of his first wife, Dr. Hutchinson moved to East Hampton with his three daughters and in 1763, he married Phoebe Parsons.

Whether he bought or built the place that was to become our village hall is not known. Mrs. Phoebe Hutchinson died in 1784. Dr. Hutchinson died in 1790. In his will, the dwelling house was left to his youngest son, Eli, then only eleven years old. With the exception of one daughter, the Hutchinson family members left East Hampton and moved to Rensselaerville, N.Y. The house remained vacant until Eli was 21 years old.

On Thanksgiving Day, 1798, a young clergyman, recently graduated from Yale University, came to East Hampton hoping to become pastor of the town's only church. After several anxious months of preaching and waiting, Rev. Lyman Beecher "received a call" and accepted it. His salary was \$300 per year. By September 1799, he returned to Connecticut to marry Roxanna Foote to whom he had been engaged for two years. The newlyweds boarded first with local families. By June, 1800, Lyman Beecher bought "a dilapidated old house with five acres of land." The property was described in a deed signed by Eli Hutchinson as "a certain House and Barn and Lot of Land in the town of East Hampton containing about five acres, bounded northwesterly by the land of William Mulford, Southeasterly and southwest-erly by the Land of William Huntting and Northwesterly by the town street." The Beechers paid \$800 for the property and spent \$300 in repairs to make the dwelling habitable. Lyman Beecher described the house as "a two story framed house, shingled instead of clapboarded on the sides, the gable end to the street." He laid new pitchpine floors, had a new fireplace made and finished the back rooms and chambers, also a small bedroom below. The floors were laid over the whole of the lower part of the house, according to a letter by Roxanna to her sister. She also stated that there was "in the unfinished end next the lot a convenient new milk room and pantry and on the side next the street a decent large bedroom."

Lyman and Roxanna Beecher were to spend the next ten years in their house, a short time but an eventful one. It was here that Roxanna spun and wove a bale of cotton into the famous carpet that she decorated with hand painted roses. In 1802, Lyman Beecher set out the

first orchard in East Hampton. Roxanna planted flowers and shrubs in the dooryard, including a snowball bush and a catalpa. They were the first to clear away the woodpile in the street and set out shade trees in their dooryard garden. The Beechers set an example others followed and the appearance of the village was much improved.

By 1806, five children, (Catherine, William Henry, Edward, Mary, and a baby that died young) were born and expenses were greatly increased. Mrs. Beecher concluded that a school would bring in much needed money. She advertised and soon had several young ladies to be educated. Rev. Beecher himself taught composition, Roxanna taught higher English, French, drawing, painting and embroidery. Embroidery was an essential accomplishment at that time. Home Sweet Home Museum has among its collections a splendid example of this needlework school, done by Sarah Payne, the sister of East Hampton's most famous native son, John Howard Payne.

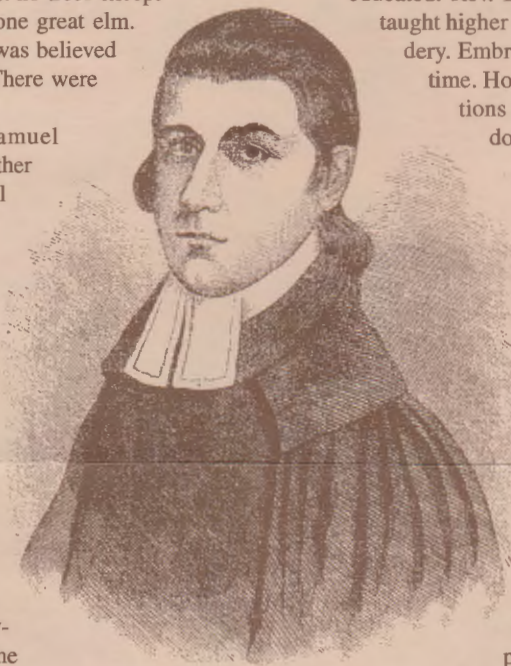
Although the school was a successful venture, its fees barely covered the expenses of a household of 14 people. Four of the school's young ladies boarded with the Beechers. One boarder from Honduras named Eleanor Lawless brought her piano to the school, the first ever seen in East Hampton. It was a special source of enjoyment for Lyman Beecher, who was fond of music. He could play lively music on his violin, but when a girl took a dancing step he ended the song with a terrible screech.

The stories of Lyman Beecher's life in East Hampton are many. Often told were tales of his absent mindedness, his fishing and hunting experiences and his good humor. He was a popular teacher and principal of Clinton Academy for about five years although, as he described it, "It was horrible - a perfect torture. It was just like driving Uncle Lot's old plow, only worse, to sit there looking at my watch ten times an hour to see when I should get out!"

From the pastorate in East Hampton, Beecher went on to become the most prominent minister of his generation. He is credited with being the man who ended dueling in America, a result of a sermon preached in East Hampton in 1806, after the death of Alexander Hamilton. He became the country's leader of the Temperance movement. He was scathing in his criticism of those who sold rum to the Montauk Indians in exchange for the corn they needed to keep from starving in the winter. In recounting the story to his daughter Harriet, he said "I didn't set up for a reformer, but I saw a rattlesnake in my path and I smote it." He also exerted great influence on the church music of his day.

A 19<sup>th</sup> century journalist called Beecher "the father of more brains in America than any man of his day". His gifted children included Harriet Beecher Stowe, who, as author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was described by Abraham Lincoln as "the little lady who started the big war." Another of his famous children was Catherine Beecher, the first American home economist. His son, Henry Ward Beecher, went on to become the best known and most popular clergyman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The departure of the Beechers from East Hampton was a sad occasion. Unlike his predecessors Lyman Beecher could not afford to stay. He laid the matter fairly before the townspeople and his needs were not met by the trustees. For five years he had spent \$100 more per year than



Rev. Lyman Beecher



he had received and was in debt. He asked that the congregation meet the debt and thereafter pay him \$500 per year, but the trustees tried to drive a hard bargain. Would he, they asked, promise never to ask for any more money? "No," he honestly told them, "I am unable to say that. I must have a salary upon which I can live." He also told them "If I was going to be a missionary, it would be to the poor and not to the rich."

There were many who objected to his removal. Captain John Dayton, East Hampton's local leader during the Revolution, told Roxanna that he should be willing to pay his proportion of a thousand dollars a year provided Beecher would return. When knowledge of his decision became public, the congregation of Litchfield, Connecticut happily snatched him up and the Beechers moved away. On January 27, 1810, they sold their old house to Abraham Hand, for \$1,875.00, "lawful money."

Abraham Hand, was a sixth generation descendent of John Hand of Kent, England, one of the 35 original proprietors of East Hampton. Abraham accompanied his father when he left Long Island for Saybrook, Connecticut in September, 1776 because of the occupation of the British. After his marriage, he and his wife Abigail Talmage, removed to a village named Covert, in Seneca County, New York, but returned to East Hampton in 1810. His household included his nephew George and niece Catherine. George inherited the house after his uncle Abraham died.

Captain George Hand (so called because he held that office in the local militia) was a carpenter. He married Eliza Abigail White of Sagaponack. In 1839, several years before his marriage, Captain George changed the appearance of his old house considerably when he raised the long sloping roof, replaced the central chimney with others built at the ends and sides of the house. The paneled door remained unchanged and he left the windows and lower stories as they had always been. The fireplaces that are visible in the house today date from that renovation, as does the newel post and banister on the front stairs.

An important addition to East Hampton was made by Captain Hand just after Abraham Lincoln was elected President in 1860. He built the first post office in the village behind the back door of his house. It had sixty boxes which greatly exceeded the demand at that time. Throughout the Civil War, the men of the village congregated in this place, to hear the news of those serving in the war and to discuss the events of the day. After Captain Hand died suddenly in 1865, his widow continued to conduct post office business. In 1907, she was a remarkable old lady who had raised two sons and supported herself for over forty years. She told her son George that she wanted a ride in one of those new automobiles for her 80th birthday gift. Her son obliged her and rented one of the few cars in town. As they drove around the Village Green, a woman saw her and said to a companion, "There's George Hand, trying to kill his mother in an automobile."

George Henry Hand, his brother John and their mother instigated further changes to the old Beecher house. Mrs. Hand took in summer boarders. As there were no hotels in East Hampton, boarding houses provided the only rooms for early summer visitors. In October, 1895, an addition was built to the rear of the house. Two years later in January 1897, the East Hampton Star announced that George Henry and his brother John Hand were making extensive improvements to their house. A large two story addition was built on the rear, the old projection on the north side was moved



*The Beecher-Hand house after 1897 renovation.*

away (was this Roxanna Beecher's washroom and pantry?) and a new "piazza" was built across the front of the building. The inside of the house was supplied with a full line of plumbing. It was reported that, "Mrs. Hand has gone to Sag Harbor to remain until the work is finished."

So many alterations were made by the two Hand sons that by March the house had five new rooms making a total of 17 altogether plus a bathroom, "all comfortably heated by furnace excepting the bathroom which is heated by hot water from the boiler connected with the kitchen range." The Star wrote, "The work in the bathroom is especially fine, the nickel fittings all having been made to order for the job." These improvements were made at a time when many East Hampton houses were undergoing a "brushing up" to attract summer visitors. In May 1901, the old post office which stood in the corner of the yard was moved to Buell's Lane to be used as a business office.

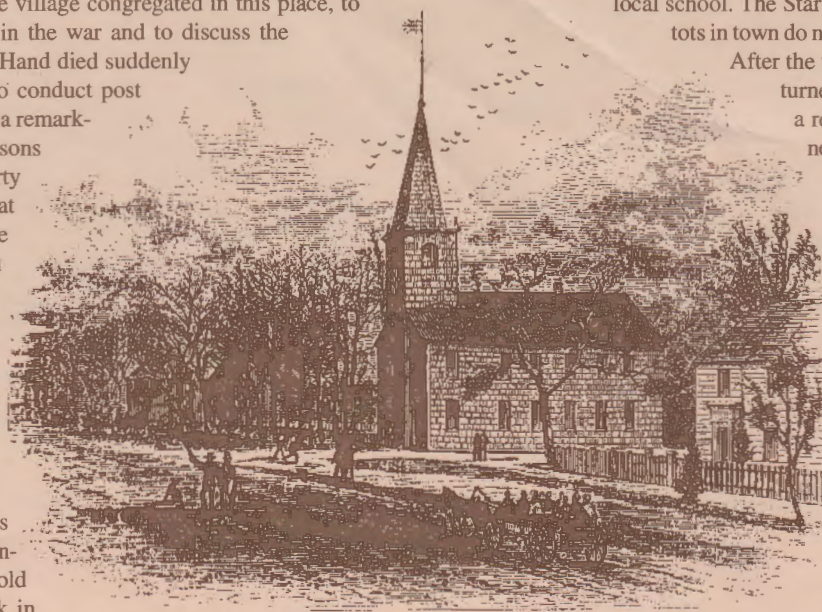
George Henry Hand married on November 11, 1902 Miss Julia Beaman of Gouverneur, New York. Miss Beaman had been one of the prettiest and most popular teachers in the Primary Department of the local school. The Star told its readers, "Very few little tots in town do not know and love Miss Beaman."

After the wedding, Mr. and Mrs. Hand returned from their wedding journey to a reception, the likes of which was never seen again in East Hampton.

Few people today have ever attended a charivari, a raucous and mock serenade for the newlyweds. It was once customary to gather before the home of a new couple and make as much noise as possible until the groom came out to treat the crowd. The more popular the couple, the wilder the celebration.

The "shivaree" given the Hands was spoken of in hushed tones for many years and helped spell the end of the tradition. As George and Julia Hand reached the old Beecher house, about two hundred people greeted them. An enormous pile of

barrels and boxes shot forth sparks and flames as the carriage containing the couple stopped at the gate. Almost every man present had a gun and soon after the arrival, the guns were fired in quick succession. The crowd in the street steadily grew larger. The Star reported, "Someone with a bold spirit and a gun ran across the street and on entering Mr.



*The Town Church, built 1717, very close to where Guild Hall now stands.*



Hand's yard, fired near the house. This hero was followed by scores of others and then all reserve on the part of the serenaders was gone and all the dogs of war were let loose. There was a shout in the back yard and out of the driveway came a howling mob dragging a farm wagon containing a live hog. This amused the crowd and a roar of laughter was followed by more musketry. A framework was erected in the street from which some excellent fireworks were shot off. After the performance had been going on about an hour, Mr. Hand treated the company but this did not stop the serenaders and the shivaree was kept up with more or less intensity until two o'clock in the morning. During this time, two black hogs were striped with yellow paint and set at large, a horse was taken from Mr. Hand's barn and hidden, the wheels were removed from all the wagons and distributed around town and the front piazza was loaded with "truck" gathered from various parts of the village."

Despite the homecoming, the Hands settled into a gracious and quiet mode of family life. In the large house, Mr. and Mrs. Hand lived out their lives, having only one son. Mrs. Hand was always hospitable and generous with her house and for many years, her large double parlor was used for LVIS meetings. The door was never locked and members knew they could use her house at any time. In 1910, she had a party to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the transfer of the deed for the Beecher house to the Hand family.

In 1994, the Village of East Hampton bought the historic building for use as a Village Hall. Because of its history, the Village Trustees felt it was imperative to protect its presence on Main Street. Just as Rev. Lyman Beecher thought the house to be a good investment, so it seems to be for the Village, as the former Village Hall could no longer adequately serve the public and meet the increased demand for services. It also had no parking which was a major problem. It was sold for \$900,000. The purchase and renovation of the Beecher-Hand house was accomplished for \$990,000. The transaction doubled the work space, provided parking facilities and last but not least, restored and preserved

the entrance to the Village business district. The transformation of an historic house to its adaptive reuse has been a splendid achievement.

\*\*\*\*\*  
**A**s you walk through the building, you may wish to know how the house was used in the Beecher's time. Catherine Beecher wrote the following details in an undated letter:

*Dear Brother,*

*The picture of father's old home at East Hampton is, with slight exceptions, exactly as I remember it in childhood and calls up many pleasant memories.*

*The large room on the left, as you enter, was the sitting room and behind it a bedroom. Father's study was a small room on the right of the front entry. The schoolroom was over the sitting room and in the two chambers opposite were four young ladies who boarded with us. The chambers over the kitchen and bedroom were given to the housekeeper and to Zillah and Rachel. We took our meals in the sitting room.*

Today, the sitting room is the reception area and the bedroom behind is an office space. The Building Inspector's Office is in the former study. On the second floor, the schoolroom is today the office of the Mayor and the Village Administrators office once was a bedroom for the boarding school students.



*George Henry Hand and son George Beaman Hand*

**Sources**

- The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher, edited by Barbara M. Cross, Vol. I: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961*
- Lyman Beecher, 4<sup>th</sup> Minister of the First Presbyterian Church by Ernest Eels; The East Hampton Star, Dec. 5, 1935*
- The Long Island Collection, East Hampton Library, (deeds)*
- Lyman Beecher, Harpers New Monthly Magazine, Vol. XXX, No. 180*

## The East Hampton Village Hall

86 Main Street, East Hampton NY 11937 • 631-324-4150 • Mayor: Paul F. Rickenbach Jr.