

Castle Chronicle

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Research Reveals New Perspectives on African-American History in Rhode Island

James C. Garman, PhD

Assistant Professor, Archaeology, Salve Regina University

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Thank-Yous

In discussing Rhode Island, the birthplace of many freedoms, the cruel enslavement of human beings is rarely considered. Throughout the course of two centuries, we have created innumerable myths about our state's past. There were never that many enslaved people in Rhode Island, goes one, and those that were here were treated much more humanely than their counterparts in the American South.

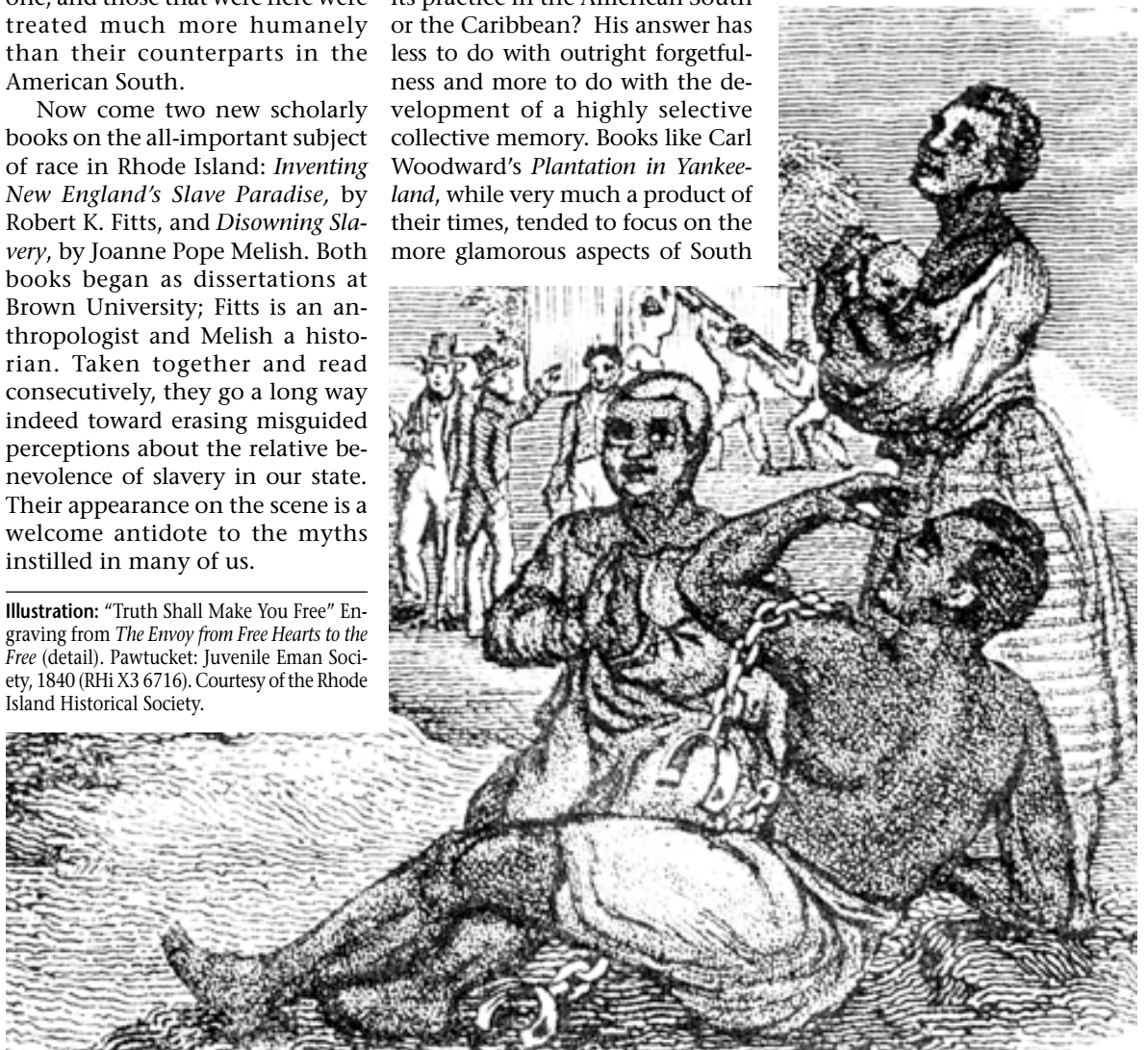
Now come two new scholarly books on the all-important subject of race in Rhode Island: *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise*, by Robert K. Fitts, and *Disowning Slavery*, by Joanne Pope Melish. Both books began as dissertations at Brown University; Fitts is an anthropologist and Melish a historian. Taken together and read consecutively, they go a long way indeed toward erasing misguided perceptions about the relative benevolence of slavery in our state. Their appearance on the scene is a welcome antidote to the myths instilled in many of us.

Illustration: "Truth Shall Make You Free" Engraving from *The Envoy from Free Hearts to the Free* (detail). Pawtucket: Juvenile Eman Society, 1840 (RHi X3 6716). Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

Inventing Rhode Island's Slave Paradise is a detailed study of the enslavement of Africans in South County. Fitts begins with an intriguing question: that is, how did Rhode Islanders manage to forget about slavery, or, alternately, describe its daily routine as somehow more benign and less vicious than its practice in the American South or the Caribbean? His answer has less to do with outright forgetfulness and more to do with the development of a highly selective collective memory. Books like Carl Woodward's *Plantation in Yankee-land*, while very much a product of their times, tended to focus on the more glamorous aspects of South

County life—the estates, the parties, the horse races—while ignoring the question of slavery. Worse still, writers like Caroline Hazard made everyday plantation life sound like *Gone with the Wind*, with African Americans content to sit around the fireplace and sing

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Note from the President

We're expecting! Some years ago, Nate Fuller and Bud Nannig placed an osprey stand on Rabbit Island. Each spring we have watched for interested feathered friends. This year it seems to be happening! A pair of osprey have built a modest home and appear to have a family plan. Any interested parties are welcome to our home to view activity—our binoculars or yours.

On a more serious note: An organization the size of the Cocumscussoc Association is very vulnerable to leadership struggles. Like others of our size there seems to be a general view that there are enough people available to accomplish our mission. In fact, there are a few who are really overworked. Even with new, enthusiastic and highly qualified trustees and volunteers arriving on the scene, some important tasks may not be completed.

We are fortunate to have a sizable sustained interest group in our Docents and Junior Docents. However, there are areas of work and responsibility for which we need volunteers. Please consider Smith's Castle when planning your time and special interest activities. Speak to me or Barbara Carey to learn more about opportunities to grow in and with the Castle.

—Richard Bowen

From the Annex Window

The Castle is humming, and everyone's a little breathless! Before the season opened May 5, docents had already provided nearly 500 children with educational programs. We need more help to fill teachers' requests. Can you be a school tour docent in the fall? It's very rewarding!

If that doesn't appeal, could you. . .

Join the membership committee right now?

Work with the Junior Docents?

Help twice a month with admissions?

Help once a month with grounds care?

Paint special event signs four times a year?

Join the Castle Chronicle staff?

Help start a fund-raising committee right now?

Assist soon with grant research and writing?

Help put up Castle storms and screens?

Work once a week in the gardens?

Help on Plantation Days, September 29 and 30?

Help get ready for Plantation Days?

Prepare mailings six times a year?

Organize and maintain a Castle photo file?

Clip articles and maintain a press file?

Assist with publicity?

Sew "loaner" costumes for special events?

Help plan ongoing docent recruitment?

We're waiting to hear from you! Call 294-3521.

—Barbara Carey

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What's Ahead

June 9 Strawberry Festival Adds Free Entertainment and Gifts from the Garden

On Saturday, June 9, from noon to 4 p.m., in addition to the traditional delicious shortcake, the 2001 Strawberry Festival will feature exciting entertainment sponsored by the North Kingstown Arts Council. The Dingle Regatta, a well-known Celtic music group, plays from 12:30 to 1:30. Marc Levitt, Rhode Island storyteller, presents his rendition of Johnny Applesseed from 2:00 to 2:45. Closing out the entertainment from 3:00 to 4:00, the Ladies of the Rolling Pin (photo) will perform



dances in English folk tradition from the medieval period. Rose of Sharon of Narragansett, Garden Gear of Middletown, and Schartner's of North Kingstown will sell garden related specialties. Children can do fun craft activities, including last year's favorite, tussie mussies. Invite your friends and neighbors, bring a blanket or lawn chair, and spend the afternoon. Shortcake with beverage is \$5 per person. House walk is \$1 for non-members. Children's crafts are \$1 each. Admission is free. ■



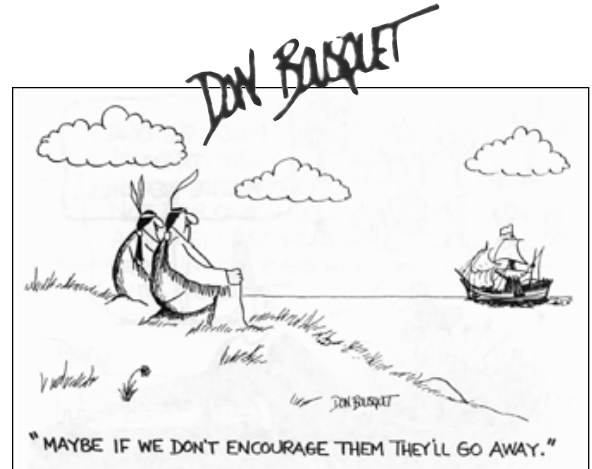
Docents

Docent Training Opens Doors for Essential Volunteer Role

The first of six sessions of the 2001 docent training program was held on Thursday, April 26. The new format is reorganized to present instruction in historic sequence by century, interweaving the life of the period to related rooms of the house, significant architectural features, and objects in the collection. Throughout the series, the focus is on providing trainees with necessary back-

ground information and preparing them for giving tours.

Docent interpreters play a key role in the work of the museum, and all members are asked to be ongoing partners in recruiting new candidates. Being a docent is a unique opportunity to learn about local history and to interpret the museum message to a variety of Castle audiences. Call 294-3521 for more information. ■



© Don Bousquet

The Shift was Basic for 18th-Century Women

The shift was arguably the 18th century woman's most important item of clothing. It was underwear, a nightgown, and under certain circumstances, a wedding gown.

In Europe they were made of linen and were later made of cotton and known as chemises. The rich could have many, and shifts were the only item of clothing that might be washed regularly. Shifts were an essential and practical item of everyday life. They were worn under everything including stays. They protected other items of clothing from sweat and the skin from chaffing because of stays. Shifts were slept in at night because specific garments for sleeping were not made until well into the 19th century.

Shifts were not generally worn in public. One exception was a shift wedding. When a woman's husband passed away and left her with debts, she was responsible for

paying them. If she remarried, her new husband became responsible for her debts. This was unless she was willing to declare bankruptcy by being married in her shift in the middle of the road. She was allowed to wear only her shift and, in Rhode Island, the couple had to be married on a street where three towns met.



The Junior Docents are planning an 18th century fashion show for an upcoming event. The girls are making shifts, stays, petticoats, and vests or jackets. The boys are working on knee breeches, shirts, and waistcoats. They did extensive research and visited the textile department of the University of Rhode Island. Graduate students Megan Kelly and Blaire Gagnon showed the group stays, shoes, breeches, a shirt, and a calash (a bonnet which expands)—all original 18th century garments. ■

—Rebecca Long, Junior Docent

Resources:

Facts and Fancies Concerning North Kingstown, Rhode Island, Pettaquamscutt Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution

Everyday Dress of Rural America 1783–1800, Merideth Wright

Drawing by Abigail Seaberg,
Junior Docent

Welcome New Members

Lisa Hallberg
Laurence and Joan Ehrhardt
James Coughlin Family

New Business Members
Taylor Rental

Neil Dunay and Darrell McIntire join the special group of life members giving exemplary support to Smith's Castle. Thank you!

—as of 4/30/01

Research Reveals New Perspectives on African-American History in Rhode Island

continued from page 1

spirituals, always ready to serve the white masters and mistresses. Fitts' argument is that white authors, conscious of the injustices done by their ancestors, deliberately rewrote history with an eye toward posterity.

Fitts does much to demolish this notion, not with political rhetoric but with sound, empirical evidence. His systematic study of runaway advertisements is an excellent example. In reviewing advertisements from the *Newport Mercury* and other sources, Fitts finds examples of enslaved Africans who appear to have been broken by labor or punishments. In one case, an ad for a repeat offender describes him as hobbled in one leg, although the earlier ad puts him in excellent health. Was this individual punished for running away the first time? It is difficult to say with certainty, but Fitts is able to show, through a close reading of primary sources, that violence was inseparable from the practice of slavery, even in the pleasant meadows of South County.

Of perhaps even greater importance than the evidence for violence is the evidence for psychological cruelty. One of the most poignant analyses undertaken by Fitts is his study of naming patterns among the enslaved in South County. Using wills, probate inventories, runaway advertisements, and town records, he demonstrates the ways in which naming the enslaved was used as means of degrading individuals. Some Africans were given names laden with irony: King, Caesar, Rex, all part of a pattern that mocks someone in a position of lifelong slavery. Others were given diminutive versions of white names (i.e., Jack, Bess, Beth), reflecting the white perception that the enslaved were like little children who need-

ed paternalistic care. Still others were named after Old Testament figures (Moses, Judah) to encourage Africans and African Americans to embrace Christianity. Only a relative handful were able to mark some measure of territory by demanding to be called by African names.

Disowning Slavery picks up where *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise* leaves off. Melish, now an associate professor at the University of Kentucky, is also concerned with the process of "forgetting" slavery. Her story, while also based solidly in primary records, ranges farther afield than Fitts. One of the questions driving Melish's study is that of emancipation as a "cultural process." Rhode Island's Gradual Emancipation Act of 1784 began the process of freedom for Africans and African Americans. *Disowning Slavery* is the first work that begins to acknowledge the complexity of that process.

Melish begins with a review of slavery in New England, focussing on Rhode Island and Connecticut.



Activities of the Narragansett Planters: The dust jacket of Joanne Melish's book, *Disowning Slavery*, features a mural by cover artist Ernest Hamlin Baker. The work was carried out under the program of the National Endowment for the Arts and installed in the Wakefield, R.I. Post Office. The mural is currently undergoing restoration.

This is an excellent summary of the cultural aspects of African-American lives. She then demonstrates the ways that whites found to subvert the provisions of the Gradual Emancipation Act. Most important, she shows how African Americans began to engage (albeit carefully) in political negotiations concerning racial identities in Jacksonian America. But *Disowning Slavery* offers much

and

James C. Garman



Disowning Slavery, features the mural that was painted in 1939 by famed *Time* magazine artist Howard Chandler Christy. The mural is part of the collection of the Section of Fine Arts, Public Buildings Administration, Federal Works Agency. It is currently undergoing restoration, and will soon be returned to South Kingstown for public exhibition.

more than a simple historical trajectory. Melish traces the development of a sense of "New England nationalism," an ornery regional pride that leads to abolitionist sentiments and ultimately the Civil War. For Melish, the process of inventing emancipation stories was one in which New Englanders, concerned with the extension of slavery into western territories,

and repositories of primary records. Readers will also find his study of the historical tradition in South County extremely useful. *Disowning Slavery*, while more of a challenge, is well worth the effort. Melish writes with a heartfelt passion for her subject. Patience in following the argument will pay off. It is ironic that Melish, the historian, wrote her book in the man-

ner that she did and Fitts, the anthropologist, wrote his book in the manner that he did. *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise*, while grounded solidly in the region's history, might have benefited from broader anthropological discussions concerning the invention of race. *Disowning Slavery*, while strong indeed on cultural theory, could certainly have benefited from a discussion of the marginal African American villages which developed in the early nineteenth century: Snowtown in Providence, New Goree, in Bristol, the Matunuck Hills in South Kingstown. But these are minor quibbles. After having used scraps of secondary histories in teaching about African Americans in New England, I am thrilled to have both of these books to use in seminars. Read both of them, and you will certainly understand the wisdom of W.E.B. Du Bois' comment that the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line. ■

Both of these books have much to recommend them, although for different reasons. My sense is that readers will find *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise* a useful way to begin the study of race in Rhode Island. Fitts writes in a clean, straightforward manner; his use of jargon is minimal, and he is careful to cite evidence from local town halls

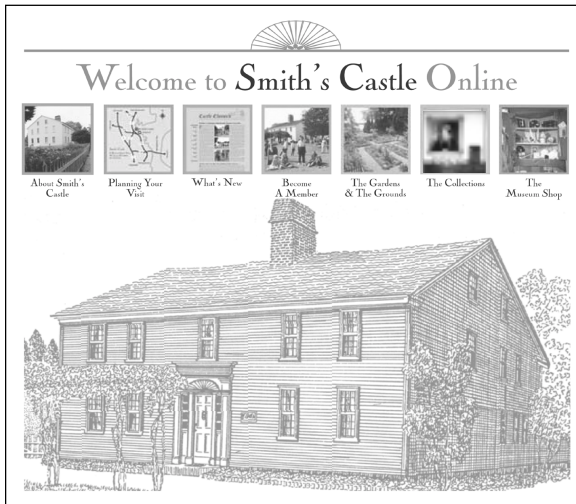
Inventing New England's Slave Paradise: Master/Slave Relations in Eighteenth Century Narragansett, Rhode Island, by Robert K. Fitts. Garland Publishing, 1998.

Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860, by Joanne Pope Melish. Cornell University Press, 1998.

James C. Garman earned a BA from Yale University, and an MA and a PhD from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is an Assistant Professor of Archaeology at Salve Regina University and is appointed to the History Department, where he is responsible for the University's new interdisciplinary major in Cultural and Historic Preservation. His special research interest is the social creation of race in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New England. Dr. Garman has published essays on Newport's past in *Historical Archaeology*, the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, and the *Journal of Northeast Historical Archaeology*.

Recent Events

www.smithscastle.org Goes Live



The Smith's Castle website, www.smithscastle.org, has gone on-line. The site consists of seven major sections: **About Smith's Castle**, a comprehensive history of the house and related topics; **Planning Your Visit**, hours, admissions, location, and services; **What's New**,

current happenings, a calendar of events, back issues of the *Chronicle*; **Become a Member**, the Cocumscussoc Association, membership levels and benefits for individuals, families, and businesses; **The Gardens and the Grounds**, the 18th century garden, the landscape and its evolution; **The Collections**, descriptions of selected objects, inventory database, the library, and a comprehensive bibliography of Smith's Castle; **The Museum Shop**, items available in the gift shop, a planned on-line bookstore, and ultimately, a catalog and on-line ordering capabilities.

Navigating through the site you will encounter some unfinished pages. A few of the topics that must be researched, written, and formatted for the web are in-depth articles on the history of the Castle, biographies and genealogies of key individuals and families associated with the Castle, the history of the Cocumscussoc Association, the

evolution of the landscape and the house, including the past restorations.

Currently being prepared is the internal website for members only. This section will contain information about activities at all levels of Castle operations—from the trustees to the individual committees—and give our membership a fast, convenient way of staying informed. It is hoped that the members-only pages will provide higher levels of accessibility, stimulate enthusiasm, and lead to increased involvement in the Association.

Our goal is to generate a site that is the most comprehensive and authoritative source of information on Cocumscussoc and Smith's Castle available anywhere. This is indeed ambitious and requires a great deal of work. If you are interested in historic research and/or writing, or in any aspect of web production, we can use your help. Contact the resident manager at 294-3521 or smithscastle@earthlink.com. ■

Vernacular Architecture Group Examines Castle

The Vernacular Architecture Forum (VAF) held its annual meeting in Newport, April 25–29, 2001, with more than 200 attendants. On April 27, more than 70 VAF members visited Smith's Castle as part of a tour of 17th and 18th century sites of architectural interest in the Wickford area.

Leading the Castle tours were Cocumscussoc Association trustee, Mary Turkel, and Bob Major, her partner in The Preservation Cooperative, Ltd., the team that conducted the award-winning stabilization and restoration of the Castle.

While most tour groups focus on the Castle's furnishings and paint schemes, VAF members tended to look below the surface at the house's

bones. Viewports installed during the Castle's renovation allowed them to examine the structure of the house and see how it was built and has changed over the years. The attic was a special stopping point for many of the VAF members.

The group found many items of particular interest at Smith's Castle:

- The crossed summer beams, an unusual feature extant in only a few Rhode Island houses of this period.
- The exterior door framing now exhibited in the viewport to the right of the front entrance. Is this original to 1678? Could there have been another front entrance?
- The cover-board, a casing with intricate moldings that encases a beam in the 17th-century bedroom.

- Support structures in the attic that give evidence for the 17th-century roof line and the unusual supports for the 18th-century roof.

The Vernacular Architecture Forum was formed in 1980 to encourage the study and preservation of the "ordinary" architecture of North America—traditional domestic and agricultural buildings, industrial and commercial structures, 20th century suburban houses, settlement patterns, and cultural landscapes. In addition to architects, VAF members include historians, designers, archeologists, folklorists, architectural historians, geographers, museum curators, and historic preservationists. ■

Audrey Moncrieff Retires from 18th Century Garden Leadership

How many of us are aware that today's 18th century garden is due to the extraordinary leadership efforts of virtually one volunteer? That volunteer is Audrey Moncrieff, who for several years has been the guiding force and primary labor force behind the care of the garden. After seven incredibly productive years, she would like to concentrate more closely on her own garden and is bowing out of her leadership role. Taking over will be a new garden committee—appropriate, as only a group could fill Audrey's garden clogs. She has graciously agreed to ease the transition and serve on the

committee for the 2001 season.

The garden was installed in the fall of 1953 after the South County Garden Club received the coveted Founder's Fund Award of the Garden Clubs of America. This award enabled implementation of a plan proposed by club member and landscape architect, Irmgard Graham. Sadly, in 1954 Hurricane Carol swept ashore, causing significant destruction of the garden, but by the spring of 1955, the garden had been planted anew and all was tidy again. Evolving over time, the garden has survived for over 50 years—a rarity in the garden world.

During her stewardship, Audrey states that she has followed the intent of the South County Garden Club and maintained the original plan and plant inventory, to the extent possible. However, specific species or cultivars of original plants are sometimes unavailable, so substitutes have been made.

The Association owes Audrey an enormous vote of thanks for her years of hard work. It is incumbent upon all of us to assure that her high standards of care are carried forth into the future and that the 18th century garden continues to be the gem that she so lovingly nurtured. ■



Smith's Castle Does Bay Program with Davisville Middle School

Thanks to Doug Somers and The Bay Company, Smith's Castle joined several providers in "What a Difference a Bay Makes," a many faceted program for a 7th grade team at Davisville Middle School. After months of planning, Jan Breault and Chris Kalina went to school on April 10 to present part one of the Castle program to each individual class in the team. Approximately 100 students interacted with the docents in a cooperative writing experience, covering Smith's Castle history and relationship to the bay from 1600 to 1640. The students visited the Castle on May 14.

Our school day went a little like this:

8:15 People hurry to class...quietly, maybe sleepily. Our colonial dress goes unnoticed.

8:22 Class empties. Halls fill with noise and laughter only to empty as the room fills once again. We begin the task. Facts are exchanged and printed on the black board. A paragraph takes shape.

9:06 New group arrives, smaller but more lively. More facts go on the board. A new paragraph is woven. Students conclude: "As a result of this early trading, the beginnings of commerce were established."

The day moves on...period 3...period 4. New facts—same result.

Lunch Students are eager to go and noise level increases a little.

It's period 5. Larger group...facts more diverse. Students talk more about Native culture and less about trade. They conclude: "As a result of the early trading, Native Americans thought they were cheated."

1:35 Last period. Students look forward to the end of the day...and so do we. Last paragraph is done. We explain the plan for the May 14 visit to the Castle.

What an enjoyable experience—the exchange of ideas, the humor, the questions, but most of all the polite, well-mannered young people of Davisville Middle School. ■

—Jan Breault

Spring Days on the Plantation and Season Opening



Joseph and Bonnie Smith and the musicians of Updike's Rose bring the graceful and colorful May Pole dance to Spring Days on May 5. Photo by Sarah Davies.

Hearty Pats on the Back to...

Chris Kalina, school tour coordinator, **Jan Breault**, education chair, and our school tour docents for extraordinary work with school children. **Jan Breault** for coordination of the Davisville Middle School project.

Audrey Moncrieff, **Dick Bowen**, and **Dick Breault** for Clean-Up Weekend planning, and to each of the working volunteers. **Dick Breault**, **Darrell McIntire**, **Audrey Moncrieff**, and **Betsy Poe** for coordinating 2001 season garden and grounds care.

Shirley Burnham, **Skip Kingsley**, and **Elinor Kelly** for coordinating a beautiful Spring Days on the Plantation.

Carol Bozarth for gracious and enthusiastic coordination of the 2001 docent training.

Sandy Bernier and Weavers Guild members **Marilyn Collins** and **Tony**

Konnor for preparing the great loom and returning it to working condition.

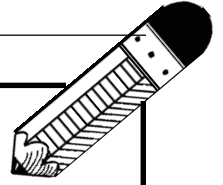
Joe and Bonnie Smith and **Updike's Rose** for the Spring Days May Pole Dance.

Candace Bengtson for maintaining the Castle lawn display board. Candace also made and donated a sampler for display in the Gift Shop and as a visual aid for school tours.

Mary Turkel, **Bob Major** (Mary's business partner in The Preservation Cooperative), **Carol Bozarth**, **Louise Richter**, and **Nancy Sprague** for staffing the house and the hospitality coffee and tea service for the Vernacular Architecture Forum visitors.

Russell Bengtson and the law firm of **Carroll, Kelly, and Murphy** for the donation of an office chair, two bookshelves, and a worktable.

Mark Your Calendar



Strawberry Festival
Saturday, June 9
Noon–4 p.m.

Plantation Days
Saturday, Sept. 29
11–5 p.m.
Sunday, Sept. 30
11–3 p.m.

Chris and Larry Kalina for the donation of two cast iron cooking pots to be added to the working collection of implements for hearth cooking.

Nisha Pathak, **Heather Skenyon**, and **Lauren Demerchant**, North Kingstown High School students, for community service. Nisha and Heather did clerical work. All three painted the Spring Days sign.

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