

# Sutton Historical Society Bulletin



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Kate Hutchinson, Senior Editor  
Malcolm Pearson, Editor Emeritus

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## 50th Anniversary of the 1953 Tornado

June 9th, 2003 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the 1953 tornado that swept through 46 miles of Worcester County, leaving a trail of immeasurable destruction and a death toll of 94 fatalities in little more than an hour. Government records classify this natural disaster as the



Period Photo by Rita Canney of Rutland

20th most deadly tornado in recorded American history. The tornado formed just over the Quabbin Reservoir and traveled all the way to western Framingham. In honor of this anniversary, we are reprinting an article from the Worcester Telegram & Gazette on the tornado's impact on Sutton.

## Sutton Airman Learns of "Other" Tornado

From the Sutton Diary, Worcester Sunday Telegram, July 28, 1957

By Robert A. Foster, Telegram Staff Reporter

*Reprinted with permission of the Worcester Telegram & Gazette*

SUTTON, Sunday--Naval Airman James B. Brigham of Leland Hill road stepped off a plane at Worcester Airport the morning of June 10 and hitched a ride toward home.

He hadn't seen his parents since Christmas and he wanted to surprise them. He had gotten an unexpected leave from electronics training in Memphis, Tenn.

He was anxious for the family when he first heard about the tornado of the previous day. Then people at the airport told him the twister had cut through Holden, northern Worcester, Shrewsbury and Westboro. It hadn't come anywhere near Sutton, they said.

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## Upcoming Meetings:

*Tuesday, July 1st:*

Pot Luck Supper, Blacksmith Shop, 6:00 PM.  
Speaker: Paul Brosnihan.  
A tour of the Rufus Putnam Museum will follow supper.

*Tuesday, August 5th:*

Pot Luck Supper, Eight Lots Schoolhouse, 6:00.  
Speaker: Paul Brosnihan.  
A tour of the School House will follow supper.

*Tuesday, September 2nd:*

Look for Announcement in Worcester Telegram & Gazette.

*Tuesday, October 7th:*

Sutton Senior Center, 7:30. Guest Speaker: J. R. Greene

Suggestions and submissions for the *Bulletin* are accepted by mail and email:

Kate Hutchinson  
27 Vinton St. #3  
So. Boston, MA 02127  
[stkellen@dcne.net](mailto:stkellen@dcne.net)

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A motorist let Airman Brigham off at the corner of Leland Hill road and drove on.

### Stopped Short

The young sailor picked up his suitcase and walked down the dirt road toward the 12-room house, the 100-foot cow barn and the giant chestnut trees that had meant home to four generations of Brighams.

He rounded a bend in the road and stopped short.

Straight ahead was the flattened wreckage of the cow barn. Beyond was the shattered roofless shell of the 150-year-old Brigham home.

The giant chestnut tree was sprawled the length of the front lawn. Its torn roots pointed accusingly at the sky.

There was no movement anywhere.

### The Little Twister

People had told Airman Brigham about the big tornado that swept through northern Worcester. They hadn't told him anything about the smaller twister that simultaneously tore a trail of destruction from Singletary Lake southeastward through Sutton, Northbridge and other towns.

That was the tornado that had made all the difference to the Brigham family.

This is their story.

The previous afternoon Mrs. John D. Brigham Sr., James' mother, was sitting in the shade of the big chestnut tree with her sister, Mrs. Oscar Stowe of West Millbury, who had come over to spend the day.

### The Chestnut Tree

Mrs. Brigham was telling Mrs. Stowe how the tree had been planted 100 years ago by the family that owned the house before the Brighams. It had been damaged severely by lightning 30 years ago, but now it was bigger than ever.

"I guess there isn't anything going to kill that tree now," said Mrs. Brigham, with a trace of pride.

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The two women were still sitting at the kitchen door when Mr. Brigham drove up with their daughter Joan, 19, and one of their grandchildren, 2-year-old Mark Brigham. Joan was taking care of Mark while her bother John and his wife went out for the evening.

Because it was such a warm day, the family decided to have supper early and enjoy a long evening out under the chestnut tree.

Mrs. Brigham served supper in the kitchen at about 5.15 pm.

As they ate, they noticed lightning on the horizon. Mark climbed into Mrs. Brigham's lap.

Then it began to rain--lightly at first and then hard.

Mr. Brigham rose from the table and headed upstairs to close windows.

### **Spun by Wind**

Mrs. Stowe went to shut the kitchen door.

Both Joan and Mrs. Brigham also got up from the table, Mrs. Brigham with Mark in her arms.

Suddenly the wind seemed to be blowing hard. Mrs. Brigham looking out a window and the window shattered before her eyes.

She cried out as glass cascaded into the kitchen.

"The wind spun me around with the baby in my arms," she recalls. "I knocked into Joan several times."

Then the wind sent all three of the women reeling through the open bathroom door, Mrs. Brigham still clutching Mark.

Joan pushed the others to the floor.

### **Upstairs and Down**

At about the same moment Mr. Brigham dove for the floor in the upstairs hall and rolled against a partition. His first warning of danger had been the sound of the roof tearing off.

Upstairs and downstairs the dazed family weathered the tornado about as well protected as they could have been if warned.

There was no rearing sound. There was just the tearing noise when the roof left and the din of a thousand hard objects slamming the sides of the house and banging through the shattered windows.

### **'An Elephant's Trunk'**

When it was over Mr. Brigham came downstairs and found the family uninjured. Everyone ran outside to see what happened.

When they looked to the east, they saw what Mrs. Brigham described as "a huge black ice cream cone" weaving away from them.

"It's tail was like an elephant's trunk," she said, wiggling her finger to illustrate. "It had a little curl at the end."

Although they couldn't have known it at the time, another of the Brigham's four sons, Robert M. Brigham of Millbury, was driving a pick-up truck on Hill street in Northbridge.

He saw the tornado coming at him across Adams Farms.

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"It looked like an ink-black trail into the air," he said. "At first I thought it was smoke from a fire."

### **Unhurt In Truck**

"When it got closer, I saw the twist of it. Then I saw a barn go into the air and I knew what it was. But it was too late for me to get out of the way."

He brought the truck to a halt beside a stone wall and lay-down under the dashboard.

He heard the crash of falling trees and utility poles around him and a hail of sand and rocks against the sides of the truck.

When the tornado passed, he got out of the truck and looked after it. He was unhurt and the truck was all right except for its pock-marked sides.

### **No Serious Injury**

The Lucy Adams home nearby was 10 feet off its foundation.

Because the Sutton-Northbridge tornado caused no deaths or serious human injuries, it went virtually unmentioned in early reports of the Worcester area disaster.

Nobody told Naval Airman James Brigham about it at the airport because nobody there knew of the "other" tornado.

### **Airman Comes Home**

As the sailor ran frantically toward the ruins of the family homestead the morning of June 10, he saw a familiar car driving in his direction from the other side of the smashed buildings.

It was his car. He had left it at home with the family when he entered the Navy.

In the car of were his parents and his sister Joan, on their way to look over the wreckage. Their own car was burried beneath timbers from the barn.

Airman Brigham is back in Memphis now, and his parents and sister are living temporarily in a house near Windle Airport in West Millbury.

The house is being provided by Winfred W. Windle, owner of the airport and president-treasurer of W. W. Windle Co.

The Red Cross has supplied Mrs. Brigham with replacement for some of the kitchen utensils she lost.

Most of the Brigham furniture, dishes and bedding were undamaged. Friends and relatives removed them from the old house within hours after the tornado and stored them half a dozen different barns nearby.

Authorities have condemned what is left of the Brigham homestead. The family expects to sell their 75 acres and rent a home elsewhere. Mr. Brigham, victim of a heart condition, had recently given up dairy farming for a Millbury postal job.

### **Had Planned To Sell**

"We were planning to sell before the tornado," he explained yesterday. "We had a good prospect all lined up. He had agee to buy, and the papers were being drawn up."

"We would have felt terrible, though, if the deal had already gone through," added Mrs. Brigham. "Imagine! Folks buying a farm and then having a tornado destroy the buildings the very next day!"

## Director's Profile: Steve LeClaire

*By Kate Hutchinson*

If you drive down Putnam Hill Road, you might be taken with the view of the brown Colonial style house set back from the street with its vast lawn and extensive collection of John Deere tractors. This house, painstakingly built to recreate history, is home to Steve LeClaire, a member of our Board of Directors.

Steve is a lifelong resident of Sutton, son of Bob and Betty LeClaire of Singletary Farm on Boston Road. He graduated from Sutton High School in 1977, where he played in the band. Following high school, he attended college at the University of Lowell, training to be a music teacher, and graduated in 1981.

Steve currently owns the local Stephen Benjamin Insurance Agency, which he inherited from his parents. He has been married to Joy Kennen from Auburn for over 18 years, and they have two children, Lauren and Ben, who both attend Sutton Jr./Sr. High School.

In 1998, Steve headed the first ever Civil War Weekend in Sutton, a role he reprised in 2000 and 2002. These event served to raised money for the restoration of the Town's 1862 Napoleon cannon "Old Ben." Steve had a large hand in restoring the cannon, and currently is working on plans for a shed to house the cannon, work which recently earned him the Daughters of the

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### Picturing History: Identified



*Submitted by David Lavallee:* Rear row, 2nd from left: Roderick Lavallee (David's grandfather). Sitting, front: Joseph Vigeant, former owner of "The Gold Mine", or Champs Lounge. Front row, 2nd from right: Henry Gagne (David's other grandfather, and Florence Lavallee's father).

*Submitted by Liz Smith:* Front row, fourth from right: Daniel "Tighe" Smith (Liz's father).

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American Revolution Good Citizen Award. As a member of both the 25th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and the Artillery Company of Newport, RI, he is no stranger to Civil War reenacting.

Steve has always been musically inclined, playing lead guitar for the rock band Tornado Alley after college, and more recently, the banjo in the period group, the

Camp Lincoln String Band. Among his other hobbies are woodworking and collecting both miniature and full size John Deere tractors.

Steve has been a member of the Sutton Historical Society since 1985 and joined the Board of Directors four years ago. He has always had a passionate interest in Sutton, both in preserving its past and developing its future.

## Welcome to New Members

Robert Curnan  
John Ellsesser  
Robert Stowe

## In Memorium

Exelina Zuidema  
Channing Smith

Sutton Historical Society  
4 Uxbridge Road.  
Sutton, MA 01590



WALTER BAKER  
PATRICIA AINSLEY BAKER  
4C HERBERT DR  
SUTTON MA 01590

