

Sutton Historical Society Bulletin



Summer 2005 – Volume 43, No. 2
Kate Hutchinson, Senior Editor
Malcolm Pearson, Editor Emeritus

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The Essays of Sarah Armsby

From the Memoirs of Loring Lombard

Message from the President

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Finding Sarah: Part I

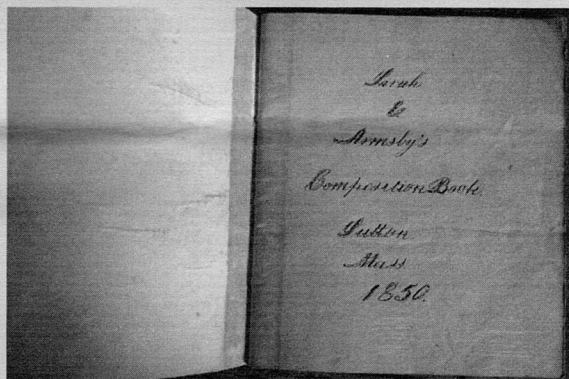
By Guest Writer *Joe Doherty*

On an October day in 1850, a Sutton schoolgirl sat down, opened the brown, marbled cover of her composition book and prepared to write her latest essay.

Nine days earlier, the composition book had been blank, its pale blue pages fresh and unmarked.

Now it contained no less than four handwritten essays, all penned by the young lady who had inscribed the following legend on the first page:

Sarah E. Armsby's Composition Book, Sutton, Mass., 1850.



Sarah Elizabeth Armsby was 18 years old that autumn and probably in her last year of school. She was the oldest daughter of Joshua and Sarah (Woodbury) Armsby. The Armsbys lived in the Old Stone section of Sutton, on what is now Armsby Road. Sarah attended classes in Wilkinsonville, where her father was superintendent of the cotton mills.

In the weeks ahead, five more essays would join the four Sarah had already written. Fully half of the little notebook would be filled with her observations, reflections and sometimes sermon-like dissertations on a hodgepodge of subjects, all recorded in the same steady hand.

Whether Sarah chose her own topics or they were assigned by a schoolmaster remains unknown. A glance at her handwritten table of contents reveals a mixture of themes, some lofty -- "*Knowledge Is Power*" -- and some mundane, "*The Importance of Trifles.*" Other

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Notes From the Editor

For this Summer edition of the Bulletin I am pleased to introduce a new feature, the Curator's Corner. The Curator's Corner will feature writing and photos from the Historical Society Collection, and hopefully draw new attention to many of the town gems that are often forgotten. For the next few editions, Paul Brosnihan has sent in the Memoirs of Loring Livingston Lombard.

In addition to the Curator's Corner, the local writer Joe Doherty has agreed to write a series on Sarah Armsby for the Bulletin, based around her composition book, a part of his private collection. Joe Doherty is a historical researcher and writer who specializes in the history of the Blackstone River and Valley. He is author of "Our River," a weekly historical series in the *Woonsocket Call* about the "forgotten history of the Blackstone River," which ran from 1993 to 1999, and the co-author of the 1995 *History of the Town of Blackstone, Massachusetts*. Raised in Woonsocket, North Smithfield and Cumberland, RI, he now resides in South Salem, NY.

Lastly, I am working on creating a website for the Historical Society and input and suggestions are very welcome. I am hoping to create an archive of older issues, and ask that anyone with older editions might consider sending them to me for scanning. All editions will be returned.

Best wishes for the rest of the summer!

Kate Hutchinson

(FINDING SARAH - Continued from page 1)

titles have a decidedly utilitarian slant -- "The Evils of Procrastination," "Distribution of Time," "Instability of Character" -- themes not uncommon in a mill village like Wilkin-sonville.

And then there's essay number five.

Her fifth effort differs from the rest. It's more breathless, more impassioned. You get a sense that once she put pen to paper, she didn't stop or even glance up until the last period was in place. We can't know what prompted it, but whatever the motivation, something about this fifth essay got under Sarah's skin, and she seems to have taken the challenge of writing it very personally. While the schoolmaster may have had a hand in directing her other essays, the topic and the tone here suggest, on this occasion at least, that Sarah alone was calling the shots.

Slowly, carefully, she etched her title onto the page: "Thoughts on Writing Composition." Then, maybe while gathering those thoughts -- or avoiding them -- she doodled a small leafy branch in the blank space between the last line of her fourth essay and the title of her fifth. Finally, she could procrastinate no longer.

What a tiresome piece of work it is to write a composition, she began. It is something disliked by all scholars though much desired by their teachers. We may be told that there is nothing hard in it, that it is only writing our thoughts on paper but we never can see it in that light. It is an occupation which we commence with feelings of repugnance and leave disgusted with our attempts. When we, feeling that we can no longer delay it. take our pencil and sitting down try to draw one bright idea into a confused and aching head, how aggravating to find that if we do produce one which we consider any way tolerable that it is so feeble that if we try to stretch it into any length we well might lose it.

With what joy we seize upon any thought which seems to give more strength to our production, handling it with all the care and precaution we can use, endeavoring to make it cover as much paper as possible in the prosecution of which object we frequently consult our dictionaries to see if for some short word we cannot substitute a longer one of the same meaning, thereby accomplishing our task in a shorter

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Curator's Corner: The Memoirs of Loring Livingstone Lombard

Editor's Introduction:

The following is an excerpt from the memoirs of Loring Livingstone Lombard, born in Sutton, the son of Nathan Lombard and his wife, Delight Allen. Loring's recollections were sent to the Sutton Historical Society by Spencer Hart of North Carolina. They belonged to his wife, Delight Allen Anderson, who is a direct descendant of Nathan and Delight Lombard through Loring. The manuscript is over one hundred pages long, typed, probably from handwritten notes (the typed version often has question marks next to words, as if indicating that the typist could not fully decipher the handwriting). Below you will find the first few pages, telling of daily life in Loring's early youth. The words are left primarily untouched, however the text has been edited because the original had virtually no punctuation and as a result was very difficult to read. In places where words appeared to be missing, or a spelling error made so as to confuse the reader, corrections have been made, as noted in [] brackets. Other errors have been left alone, to preserve as much of the manuscript's original character as possible

A Reminiscence of ones life: From the Cradle to the Grave

Eighty Eight years ago this day I was born, in the heart of good old Massachusetts of honest Parents. On that day the eleventh day of Jan'y 1810, I was ushered into this world and by the aid of our good old Doctor Monroe, and a neighbor Mrs. Josiah Dodge. I was washed, dressed and lay in my little cradle, which in those days were made with a hood over one end and open at the foot and painted a Mohogany Color for the children could rock it when necessary to keep me asleep. And the next morning all the children were asked upstairs to the Southwest chamber of our house to see their little new Brother. So I looked up and smiled at them and they all said isn't he a little beauty, and bless him. All [the children] before this one had light hair and light eyes, but I was a little beauty and as the neighbors said isn't he a beauty and so all had to kiss me so many times. Then the minister, our good old Minister Mills, for years after I went regularly to his church in the middle of the town of Sutton to hear him preach up the good old Doctrine of John Knox, all of which must have been the reason of being such a good boy. And then Elder Waters, from a mile or so

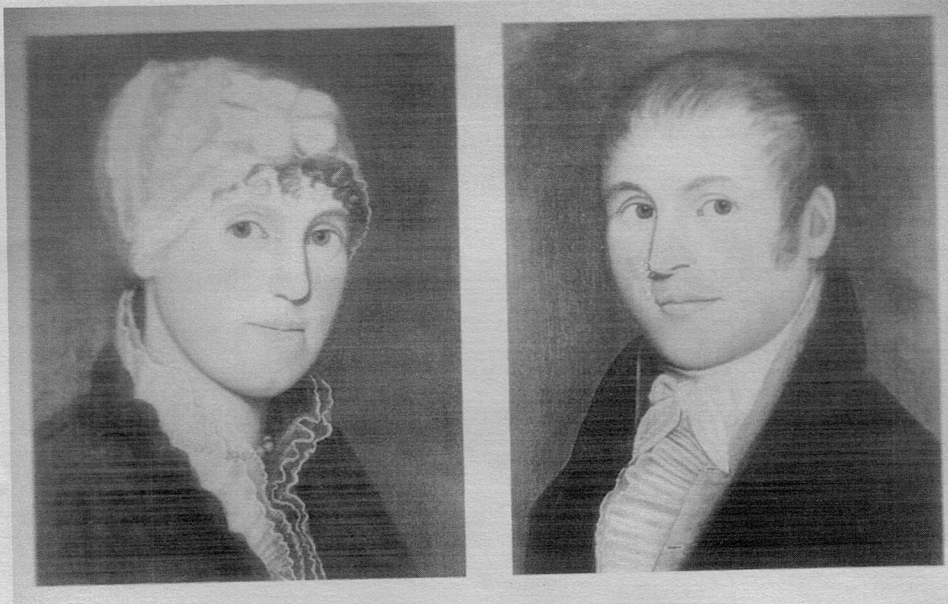
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(LOMBARD - Continued from page 3)

above us at what was called the street, called and looked in my little cradle and lifted up his hands and said "why you've got a little Elder Paul here" and sure enough the Elder Paul was one of these Evangelists who went about from Parish to parish preaching what was called a four days meeting and drew [crowds] after him and many were converted by him, and the resemblance seemed to strike Elder Water that it was thought by my sainted Mother that I should be a minister of the Gospel. Sure enough, for until I was six to eight years I was often caught out on top of the Garden Posts standing and preaching to the hens and chickens. And oftener I would get on the table in our Parlor, so I could see myself in the great looking glass, its size was about 10 in[ches] by 15 in[ches] in a gold frame, and to us in those days was considered immense and is now to this day held by one of my Grandchildren as a great curiosity and very precious of olden times. But in my childhood days, I remember well

when two years old of getting up in the morning and while the family were at breakfast Eating in the next room, I with my night dress on went in the room that was then used as work shop and stuck my toes in the warm ashe[s] in an open fireplace, we had no stoves in those days. And my two older brothers [came] in and said they were going fishing in the water pail and got up on the bench to get a nail and bend it up like a fish hook, and I cried to heave them help me up on that high bench so I could do likewise as they did, but soon as they got their hook they left the room and me on the bench. How could I get down to the floor, unless I fell off? But I always thought I had caution large, so staid till some of the workmen came in and took me down, but I did not get any fish hook nor did I catch any fish. And I never heard that my big Brothers did Either but they were two and four years older than I, so they could fish another day.

It was about this time I used to hear the folks talk about the war and the British



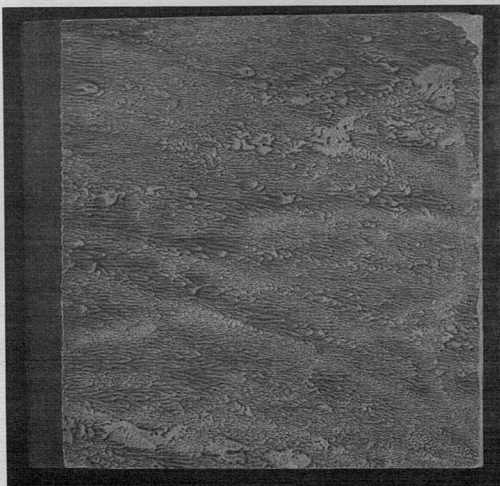
Undated depictions of the parents of Loring Livingston Lombard. Left: Delight Allen Lombard. Right: Nathan Lombard. Loring makes references to his family's wealth and status, which are echoed by the detail in these depictions, such as Nathan's elaborate ascot and shirt, and the lace on Delight's collar, and her ribbon tripped cap.

(FINDING SARAH - Continued from page 2)
time.

Frequently when the work as we think is completed on looking it over we find the same sentiment repeated several times and are obliged to exert all our thinking powers in order to express it in some different manner although at last we come to the conclusion that there is not more than one idea in the whole if there is that; it seems to possess the elastic qualities of India rubber which though it may be lengthened will when the force is removed contract to its former dimensions.

We know we have not done justice to our subject and we almost experience feelings of remorse that we should connect it with our senseless jargon. But besides all this there is another obstacle still harder to surmount, we are impressed with the idea that when ours are compared with others they will certainly prove the worst, and this being our impression when we are called upon to read them before the school we are in such a state of embarrassment that poor as they originally are we make them sound still worse.

Is there nothing which will overcome the



*The cover of Sarah Armsby's composition book.
Photo: Joe Doherty*

difficulties which lie in the way of this most important branch of education? If there is anything it is continual practice. If every one was obliged to commence as soon as he could frame a sentence he would never experience the mortifications of those whose first attempts are made at a time when something finished [is] expected from them while the productions of a little child could be compared favorably with theirs and the shame which they feel on this account is one of the greatest hindrances in the way of this improvement.

Poor Sarah. Despite her indignant posturing, she was upset most with herself. Like many writers, she felt her writing skills were grossly inadequate. She feared her essays wouldn't stand up to close scrutiny.

What would she say if she knew they were still being read 155 years later?

For better or worse, Sarah's essays -- what she deplored as her "senseless jargon" -- have accomplished a feat she never imagined: They have plucked Sarah Armsby from the anonymous backwaters of history and made it possible to introduce her to a new generation of Sutton residents.

For more than a century now, Sarah Armsby has survived as little more than a footnote in Sutton's history -- literally. The Reverends William A Benedict and Hiram A Tracy, authors of *History of the Town of Sutton, From 1704 To 1876*, cite her but twice in their 837-page volume -- once as her father's daughter, and once as her husband's wife (Sarah married in 1852, a few months shy of her 20th birthday). And only in the former instance do the good Reverends refer to Sarah by her Christian name.

Sarah's role in Sutton history might have

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(LOMBARD - Continued from page 4)

with their red coats coming to take us all with their guns. And our House was Red and shingled all over Sides and roof and it faced the South, for Father had made a mark on the floor so when it was Exactly noon and the door was open the sun would shine right on that line and could always tell when it was noon. [T]here was another door at the East End and the land descended down a little through the Orchard and on to a rise or low hill and walking to the East door led by my [stately] Mother and hearing of the terrible red coats coming from Boston, I remember looking over the rising ground to the top of that little hill expecting every moment to see the red coated British soldiers come but they never came and soon our fear were quieted - why or how I did not realize then...

So every Sunday we had to be still and prepare to ride to Church - it so happened our Church was in the center of the town and we two miles away and every body that was anybody went to church in wagons or horseback and on foot and my honored Father was a well to do man one of the select men of the town and my Mother was a noble woman and commanding personage in all church matters, and we had the only [carriage] with a top to it in the town, it was a square top chaise and large so that it would take three in it comfortabl[y] and the Older boys had the privilege of walking but we all had to be in the church soon as the bells had stopped ringing. The Pews well, they were square [with] seats around on three sides with lids that would be raised up in prayer

time - but when prayers were over those lids come down sometimes not softly but made such a racket one would think the British Soldiers had come sure enough. But in after years when that Church was burnt, the next one built had no seats that lifted up and that church stands there today an ornament and [commodious]; in the building of this My Father and Elder Brother buil[t] the Pulpit, one of the Handsomest and Elaborate in the country winding stairs on both sides, all in pure French Mahogany, a present to the Church society. But of my individual affairs long before this church matter had transpired, it was rain or shine or hot winter or summer we all went to church. Service commenced at 10 am and morning service ended at 12 am, an hour intermission when those living near went home and generally invited friends and would have a lunch perhaps. And the men and boys when to the Hotel Barroom in cold or stormy weather and at one o'clock the bells would again call us to our pews. At two pm, services would be ended and then the scramble to get their teams from the long sheds up to the Church door and bundle in and drive home where a good generous dinner was always had at about 4 pm. Then quiet reading, no play or loud talk was tolerated [on] the Lord's day, [which] was holy in those days. This was the routine for the Sabbath.

Up to the age of 18 when I left home for the business world, to resume my infant days at the age of three, my first suit of pants was furnished and I put off to school the Grandest pupil and so important was I that,

(FINDING SARAH - Continued from page 5)

been left at that if not for a small miracle in February of 2003, when after more than a century and a half her school composition book surfaced on the eBay internet auction site. It was placed at auction by a Worcester gentleman named Bill Draper.

The composition book is roughly 6" x 8", with marbled brown cardboard covers and filled with lined sheets of pale blue paper -- a forerunner of the black-and-white marbled composition books many of us grew up with. The top outside corner looks suspiciously nibbled, as though a curious mouse stopped by to say howdy-do at some point during the long years.

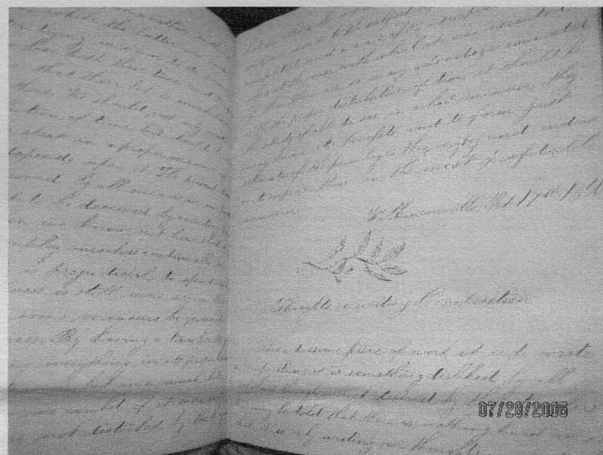
About half the pages are wall-to-wall with Sarah's handwriting, the rest blank. There are nine essays (although her table of contents indicates a total of 16 were planned) covering 26 pages, all composed between September and November, 1850; five pages of undated Latin exercises; and on the last written page what appears to be a household shopping list or budget dated 1855. Tucked into the middle of the book are two loose squares of freehand illustration -- birds, acorns, chairs and other household items -- with Sarah's married initials penciled on the back.

When asked, Mr. Draper had no specific recollection of how he acquired the composition book. But to his everlasting credit, he freely offered some additional facts about the original owner. *Hi, I thought I'd pass over some more information I happened to uncover. Sarah was 18 in 1850 ...*" his email began. In the space of a single paragraph, Draper outlined what he had gleaned of Sarah's life -- marriage, childbirth, hints of tragedy and heartbreak, and alas, Sarah's own untimely death.

And so lies the history of that little essay

book, he concluded. Best regards, Bill.

Sarah's composition book has been in my care for two years now. The storyteller in me knew from the moment I read her first essay that what I held in my hands was much more than an antique. In these pages lies an invitation from the past to open doors closed by time. An opportunity to meet a forgotten woman and family of old Sutton, and to share, if only fleetingly, something of their existence.



The interior of the book, at the start of "Thoughts on Composition." Photo: Joe Doherty

Sarah's voice will lead the way. Using her composition book as a guide, we'll explore her life and world in future installments, including the house where she grew up and lived as a married woman. It still stands today at the top of Armsby Road, uphill from the cemetery and small stream.

I'll leave you now with Sarah's first essay. It's one of a few pieces in the book that seem written for the sheer joy of it -- more heart than homework. This is the Sarah Armsby who calls to me from the past.

The Life of a Tree

(LOMBARD - Continued from page 6)

my tall aunt P who was the teacher, could not prevent my going out of school just when I thought I should show my new suit to the scholars. And the consequence was that when I got home my good mother took off my pants and put me back in my petticoats which was the greatest punishment possible

My Father having many workmen apprentices and Journeymen and had built large Shop about 20 rods west of the house at the extreme end of the land owned by him and almost next to the school house where my early education was commenced - and in those days to read, write and cipher was all that was necessary to be a good scholar - while this shop was being built the west room in the house was used as a kind of work benches but now this room was being made over new floors, and the walls torn down and in the ceiling behind the old plastering were found great curiosities to me such as muscle shells, and oyster shells which I picked up as great curiosities and ran into the other part of the house to show them to my big sister - and when all was done except the tapping of the last two boards to the floor, the man set them up thus so when they were pressed down would make all the joints tight and the man stood up on it, then my Father stepped on it and it would not go down and I said to Father let me step on it and he reached out his hand I stepped on and in jumping on it it went down into place, I was always sure that it was I that I laid that floor.

About that time many of the children in the neighborhood had the measles and my

Mother was quite alarmed, and every day cautioned me not to go out much fearing I should catch the measles, but I did not think I would and told my Mother I would not catch any of them they were all out in the stone walls and I would not touch any of them, considering them squirrels or weasels which I has seen so many times - so I didn't catch any of them - It was fashion in those days that when we had any callers and especially the minister or the great folks from the town Father always mixed a big Glass of Toddy, so called at that time always stood upon the Bureau or Dresser in the living room, Bottles of Rum Brandy and Gin and lump sugar, toddy stick and everything ready so when we had callers a large fluted Glass which would hold near a quart I should think and it was passed around and all would drink a little and at the bottom of the Glass I remember well we children would get a taste of the sugar at bottom and often used to wish they would leave a little more for us, so it was always a pleasant thing for us to have callers but those were not every day occurrences we lived in a neighborhood of Farmers and no one nearer than from one quarter to half a mile off - but when any of them came it was generally in Evening and it was Cider and apples, for the discussion.

Contributed by Curator Paul Brosnihan and edited by Kate Hutchinson

(FINDING SARAH - Continued from page 7)

My native home was in a beautiful valley which was thinly covered with trees of various descriptions. On each side the hills arose to a considerable height; in the centre dividing it into two nearly equal parts, was a rivulet now losing itself among a profusion of flowering shrubs which grew in great luxuriance along its banks and then reappearing at a little distance sparkling in the sunbeams which here and there glanced through leafy branches forming a golden network upon the earth beneath. There too was nature's music; unnumbered branches waving in the blast, the gentle murmuring of the stream as it fell from rock to rock in its course and the warbling of the birds that tempted by the beauty of the scene there assembled and poured forth their sweetest songs; all these combined and echoed back by the hills around produced an effect pleasing in the highest degree. In such scenes as these were my early years passed; they seemed like one short day of uninterrupted pleasure.

While I was yet young I was one day removed by a man who was passing who placed me in the centre of a common in a small village where he lived; at first, I was very much dissatisfied with my new situation, but I soon became reconciled and have since grown into a large and handsome tree. There have been many and great changes in the place since I have lived in it; instead of a few small houses there is now a large and populous city. The fields which were once covered with grain are now occupied with buildings; everything is changed, even I begin to feel the approaches of old age, though when I think of my early home old associations crowd over me and again I am young ...

*Sarah E. Armsby
Wilkinsonville, 1850*

Message From the President

Carolyn Amaral is resigning as the Society Historian effective in August. She has done a great job and will be missed. Carolyn, thank you for your efforts. If anyone is interested in becoming the Historian, please call Wally Baker at 508-865-4135 or send an e-mail to patwal@charter.net. The Society also has an opening for a Vice President.

The Society would like to be able to contact members who have a computer using e-mail. This would greatly improve communication when programs or locations change at the last minute as weather creates a postponement issue. If you have an e-mail address, please send a note to Wally at patwal@charter.net giving your e-mail address. Please put Sutton Historical Society in the subject line.

We would welcome any ideas, suggestions regarding future speakers, programs, or whatever else you think would be an improvement to the Society. This is your Society and anything we can do to make it more interesting will be considered.

Thanks to all the volunteers who help in maintaining our buildings, open facilities, etc. Special thanks to Paul Brosnahan, who responds to many requests from outside the Society, maintains the Bulletin Board at the Post Office and is of great assistance to the President.

I am looking forward to seeing you all at the upcoming meetings.

Wally Baker

Upcoming Historical Society Events

August 2 - Pot Luck Supper with Steve Leclair & Pete Emerick - Historical Music and backgrounds. Eight Lots School House, 6:00 PM

September 5 - Annual Flea Market & Bake Sale. Blacksmith's Shop 9 AM to 1 PM. Members are invited to bring something for the bake Sale. Tables are \$10 each.

September 11-Tour of the Rotch Duff House, Bedford, MA. Please contact Chris Sinacola for details at csinacola@telegram.com

October 18 - Tom and Brenda Malloy from the Association of Gravestone Studies, "Colonial Gravestones." Asa Waters Mansion, Millbury, MA 7:30 PM

November 1 - Genealogy Workshop with Ed Phillips of the New England Historical Genealogical Society. Manchaug Baptist Church, 7:30 PM

December 6 - Christmas Party. Location TBA, 7:30 PM

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

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COMING SOON

Look for the Historical Society's new website, launching later this year at:

<http://www.suttonhistoricalsociety.org>

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