

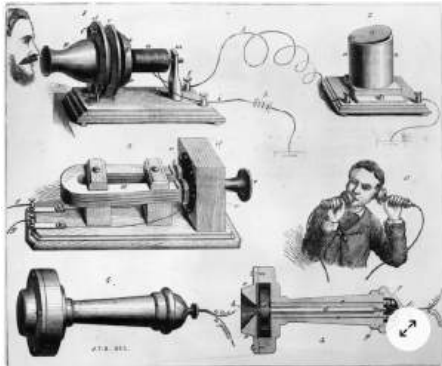
GROTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

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Spring 2026



One hundred and fifty years ago, on March 10, 1876, Alexander Graham Bell successfully demonstrated his telephone, laying the groundwork for the local networks that later connected neighbors across town and countryside.

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Lines of Connection: How the telephone brought rural Vermont households together, part one

LOUISE REYNOLDS

“Mr. Watson, come here. I want to see you.” With those seven words one hundred and fifty years ago, Alexander Graham Bell proved he could transmit language through a galvanized steel wire, paving the way for telecommunication around the globe.

But that journey would take a while and Groton would play a small role.

The first telephones in Groton were private lines. In 1895 Postmaster Manley Clarke installed a telephone in his house in Groton Village. Three years after that, State Senator Silas Griffith had telephone wires run to connect his office on what is now Seyon Pond, with his sawmills in the southern part of the state. It wouldn't be until 1905 that the first telephone exchange was set up in Groton. In the early 20th century, the telephone transformed life for inhabitants of Groton Village and made an even bigger impact for those who lived in the hills surrounding the town.

Being able to communicate from one house to another, or from one farm to another, broke down barriers of distance and isolation in a landscape where homes and farms were often miles apart. Farmers used telephones to connect with the merchants who sold their products. They could more immediately access vital information, like weather updates. Local businesses expanded their markets. The telephone also supported civic engagement and social life. It became easier to organize meetings and events and to learn the latest news and gossip, via the party line, by listening in to the conversations of neighbors.

Like other small towns across the state, the citizens of the Groton region



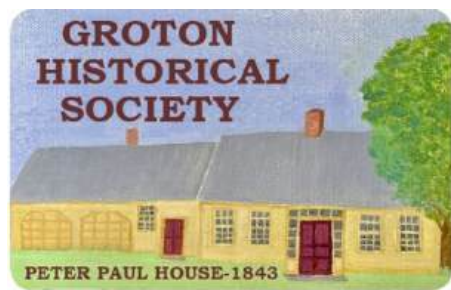
This 1878's advertisement for the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company promoted the company's growing network of metallic lines. Many of the early lines and exchanges were installed by Western Union.

built their own telephone lines and systems, reflecting a spirit of cooperation and innovation. For rural Vermonters, the telephone was more than a convenience—it was a vital link to the world beyond the hills and fields.

The telephone was not an immediate success

It took several years for Graham Bell's concept to take off. Accustomed to the speed and dependability of the telegraph, many potential customers saw the telephone as a mere diversion, or a "playtoy," as one Boston banker put it. In early 1877, the only working telephone line connected the Boston workshop of Charles Williams, Jr., a manufacturer of electrical supplies, to his home in Somerville, a small town to the northwest. Williams' friend E.T. Holmes, who sold burglar alarms, suggested using the wires for his alarms to link several telephones. Holmes bor-

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President's Report

Spring 2026

We planned 2026 as a “Year of Art” at the GHS, and it will be, but it has rapidly become so much more.

We are extremely privileged to have received the painting “Single Heifer” by Groton artist Altoon Sultan, at the end of 2025. This glorious work, depicting a local landmark, will be hung and on display

New Veterans Room Display

Q&A with Deborah Jurist

Who is William Peck? How did the GHS acquire his uniform?

The uniform is a Parade Dress Militia Uniform, which explains the red feathers that ornament the tall hat. It was donated to the GHS for public display by Melvin Benzie, the great grandson of William Peck. Groton resident Janet Puffer and her brother (our GHS genealogist and the former newsletter editor) J. Willard Benzie are Melvin’s sister and brother, also grandchildren of William Peck.

William Peck was born in Wolcott, Vermont, on February 8, 1834. He was commissioned Captain September 23, 1862, and served with the Vermont Volunteer Infantry, which was mustered into service at Brattleboro two weeks later. He was given an Honorable Discharge on January 20, 1863, due to ill health.

Prior to his enlistment for Civil War duty, he served 10 years in the Lafayette Artillery of the Vermont Volunteer Militia at Calais, where he was commissioned a 1st Lieutenant. This uniform dates from that period.

How did you come to the decision to make a more extensive, permanent display of the uniform and other related artifacts?

The William Peck uniform was stored in the basement bedroom for decades. Humidity has taken its toll on the wool and feathers, although it is still remarkably intact. It does require some repair.

We have wanted to display it, along with other Civil War era artifacts, but whenever we put it on display, we have to move it. Being handled is not good for a textile—or any antique—and after having these items appraised, we were committed to their protection. We want to secure their safety both physically and environmentally. And reduce the wear and tear on our volunteers every time we put them on display.

What were some of the key considerations for the design process? What were the challenges?

We visited the Danville Historical Society to take a look at the way they had displayed Captain Preston’s Civil War uniform, which they had recently acquired

for Village Day in Groton June 27th. Also, to our great surprise and excitement, an oil portrait of William Scott, by Barnet artist Ed Kadunc, will be on loan at the Peter Paul House in a new display area set aside for the story of the Sleeping Sentinel.

And of course, we will honor the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence all season, with decorations on the house and presentations about the history of the document. Those who attended the Groton Town Meeting in March heard a short history and abridged reading of the Declaration by several GHS directors. We will repeat this offering as the year evolves, bringing history together with celebration this year.

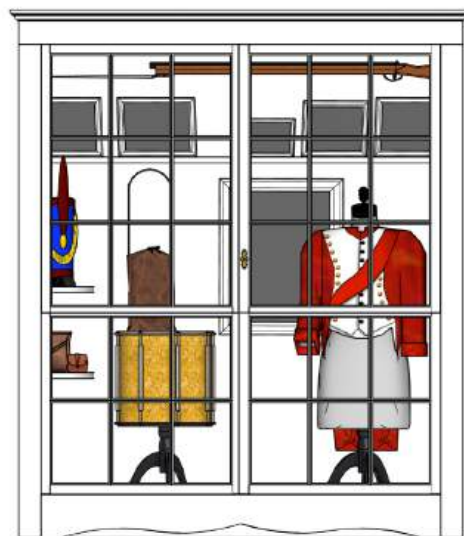
We purchased new blackout shades for all the windows for which we raised funds. We will install them at our annual clean-up day May 21, as time allows. A big “thank you” goes

out to all the folks who donated to this important endeavor.

Finally, in keeping with our goal of preserving, protecting and sharing the GHS collection, we are having a display cabinet built especially for us to house the pre-Civil War uniform of Lieutenant William Peck and other Civil War-era relics. Along with this unique display, we have acquired another handmade case to feature the Jesse Heath powder horn, which was carved in 1780 and carried by Groton’s own Jesse Heath when he fought against the British in our country’s Revolution.

Honestly, you will have to stop by this year and see everything. We will be open throughout the summer and fall. See the calendar that is always on the website for dates.

See you in the Village,
Deborah Jurist



and we were inspired.

First, we had to determine a place that wouldn’t disturb the overall feel of the house and ascertain that any changes to the current layout wouldn’t diminish any pieces in the collection that had importance to Groton. So we studied the provenance for everything we were planning to move or deaccession. Many items were purchased in antique shops in the 1980’s to outfit the house. Of course, we’re keeping every artifact that’s tied to Groton and we consulted the elders of our community to be sure we uncovered any connection we were unsure of.

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“Veterans Room,” *cont.*

Some items had been donated to the GHS on the spur of the moment, but most often records were kept, first by hand, and then converted to digital files.

What are your main objectives with this redesign of the room?

We want our display to fit into the theme of the Peter Paul House time period, be made by a local woodworker and use repurposed elements to accomplish these goals. We want to make a place for the story of William Scott, the “Sleeping Sentinel,” and the uniforms of local military figures. We also wanted to accommodate other war-related artifacts in the collection, like the Jesse Heath Powder Horn, which has been stored safely for decades.

We interviewed Emily Pratt, a fine interior woodworker who lives in Groton. Emily has a deep respect and love for antique processes. She is skilled at computer-generated design, so she transformed our ideas into a 3-D presentation; her estimate was within our budget. She has helped us choose lighting and appropriate hardware.

The doors will be constructed from large old windows that came from the Mountain Meadows Pottery Stoneshed, built around 1900. Wiring will be installed by Director Brent Smith and his helper Paul Emerson. New lighting and environmental controls will be installed in the Veterans Room.

We hope to have the basic display in place for Village Day on June 27th, and we hope to have it finished by Fall Foliage Day.

Save The Date!

**SATURDAY
JUNE 27**
RAIN OR SHINE

Groton Free Public Library
presents

**A DAY IN
OUR VILLAGE**

GROTON
Est. 1789

Open Houses, Entertainment, Activities,
Information Booths, Refreshments

GHS Will Exhibit Two Paintings By Local Artists

LOUISE REYNOLDS

The GHS is pleased to welcome two wonderful pieces of art to our collection of artifacts educating visitors to the Peter Paul House.

Portrait of William Scott

This painting, on loan from **Barnet artist Edward Kadunc**, brings Groton’s own “Sleeping Sentinel” to life. The painting was included in a recent showing of Kadunc’s work, “First Light,” at the Satellite Gallery in Lyndonville, VT. Kadunc took his inspiration for the collection of portraits from his study of 19th century Vermont history and the individuals who shaped that period. The exhibition featured oil paintings of Union soldiers from Vermont cavalry and infantry units, academic figures, suffragists, politicians and Underground Railroad agents—figures whose actions influenced local and national events.

William Scott, who lived with his family on a Groton hill farm, enlisted with the Third Vermont Regiment in July of 1861. Seven weeks later, while guarding the District of Columbia side of Chain Bridge, he fell asleep on sentry duty. Scott was court-martialed, found guilty, and sentenced to be shot nine days later.

Scott was brought before the firing squad and read the statement sentencing him to death. But at the last moment, he was allowed to go free: President Lincoln had pardoned him. Scott, who had served an extra night’s guard duty for a sick friend, had been up for 48 hours straight. A petition to General McClellan from fellow soldiers and officers, asking he be spared, saved him.

William Scott died in battle just eight months later. The dramatic story became popular throughout the country, and Scott acquired the name “the Sleeping Sentinel.” (You can read more about William Scott and the controversy surrounding differing accounts of his story in the Summer 2024 newsletter.)

Kadunc’s portrait of William Scott—taken, like others in the exhibition, from a contemporary daguerrotype—shows a soldier standing guard, gaze fixed sternly on the viewer, his hand firmly on his rifle. Moonlight gleams



Portrait of William Scott, known as the Sleeping Sentinel, by Edward Kadunc. The painting will hang in the newly designed Veterans Room.

off his belt buckle, highlighting the insignia, “US.” In the background, the long bridge over the Potomac locates the event as the Stars and Stripes wave brightly over the young man’s right shoulder. Kadunc depicts William Scott as strong and steadfast in his duty, a humble American patriot.

Edward Kadunc has studied and worked as an artist for more than 50 years. He received formal training at the University of Miami and Syracuse University, and has studied with noted American artist and printmaker Barry Moser. He’s taught locally and has provided instruction at workshops and events throughout the area. In a letter to local historians, Kadunc wrote that he hopes to “continue the exhibit as a whole collection or in part to be borrowed in support of local historical discussion.”

He was kind enough to answer a few questions.

How long have you been working on these paintings? How—and at what point—did you come to envision the portraits as not just a series, but a collection?

I have been working on these paintings for about six years or thereabouts. I started seeing them as a collection when

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“Two Paintings,” *cont.*

I realized how many important Vermonters were missing from the general narrative. I was—and still am—continuously introduced to the historical importance of individuals, as well as places and events involving the area and Vermonters. The collection doesn't seem to have an end. I will keep working on it.

Your attention to details and textures—the bags under William Scott's eyes, the veins on Abraham

Lincoln's hands, for example. What is your objective in bringing these specific details to the viewer's attention?

I bring those details out because they reflect character in just the generally grinding environment the subjects are living in: a divisive, dangerous, difficult and divided Union.

An individual's life and work, as well as the situations they are faced with, show in details; things you don't see in the old staged photographic images. I describe my interpretations

as if they [the subjects] stood in front of us, as opposed to in front of a camera. It makes them real to me, as if the photographer is out of the room. The details? Some are obvious, but I rarely stray from what is clear or possibly there, even if not obvious.

Which is your favorite painting? Why?

My favorite is probably whichever I am working on at a time. Each has its challenges, as well as artistic possibilities. I am never at a loss for possibilities or material.



Single Heifer, Ryegate, Vermont, 1994, oil on canvas, 36 x 66 inches

Single Heifer

Groton artist Altoon Sultan has donated her oil painting, *Single Heifer*, to the Groton Historical Society.

Sultan has lived in Groton since 1994.

In a 2018 essay for a gallery show (posted on her Facebook page) she described the subject matter of her painting:

“If I count my undergraduate education, I've been painting for 50 years. In that time my paintings have changed enormously, going from narrative figure compositions to “portraits” of Victorian architecture, to agricultural landscape, to a kind of still life using agricultural implements as subjects. I remain attached to agriculture as subject matter because of its production of food, and for the complex environmental issues around that production; I love visiting farms and talking to farmers.”

At first Sultan painted bucolic depictions of farm buildings and dairy

cows; later she focused on the nitty grittier business of farming—silage covered with plastic and tires, a tractor stopped by a long row of “ag bags,” the flat, round forms of commercial koi pools contrasting with the vivid green of a Baton Rouge field. A write-up of her work on the website of Hollybush Gardens Gallery, which represents Sultan in the U.K., notes her early studies with painters Philip Pearlstein and Lois Dodd at Brooklyn College, “situating her in a lineage of realism which shares an interest in precision and the vibrancy of interpretation.”

Single Heifer is very much an example of those qualities. Here's what Altoon Sultan said about the 36” x 66” painting she made in 1994:

“This painting was based on photographs and a color study in gouache, which I worked on at the site of this yellow barn. The barn used to exist, before Rte. 302 was widened, just over



In this photo, a still from a short video in the “Visiting Artists” series, Altoon Sultan has a friendly moment with a calf on the Hatchland farm. Sultan regularly visits the farm, where trucks and machinery provide a rich source of subject matter.

the border of Groton into Ryegate, on the south side of 302 [in 1998].

“I loved the fact that the barn was yellow, an unusual choice. And I loved the monumental pile of manure, which looked beautiful in the sunlight; manure is something that is supposed to be dirty and smelly, but adds fertility to the soil, spinning waste into gold. The heifer was the only animal in the yard, and she hovered close to the corner of the barn, in the shade.

“The painting was not made as a historical document, but has become one with the razing of this wonderful barn.”

Today, Sultan's paintings are more intimate and considerably more abstract, focusing on zoomed-in details of farm equipment. The Hatchland dairy farm, in Haverhill, New Hampshire, is a favorite source.

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“Two Paintings,” *cont.*

The color, depth and sunlit clarity of the forms is enhanced by the medium of egg tempera paint on calfskin parchment, which Sultan now uses exclusively for paintings. But there’s a clear through line from the earlier work. Asked by an interviewer in a video series, *Visiting Artists*, to say what her work was about, or had always been about, she replied, “shape, color, light, form”—qualities that are evident in the luminous painting of the heifer, the yellow barn and the beautifully rendered pile of manure.

Altoon Sultan’s current work includes rug hooking and porcelain relief sculpture. She has received two National Endowment for the Arts grants, an Academy Award in Art from

the American Academy, and a medal for painting from the National Academy of Design, where she was elected a member in 1995.

Her work is in many museum collections: the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; the Yale University Art Gallery; the Library of Congress; and the Fleming Museum of the University of Vermont, among others. In 1999, Sultan wrote an instructional book on painting with egg tempera, *The Luminous Brush*, currently available at Google Books and the Groton Free Public Library. She’s represented in Los Angeles by Chris Sharp Gallery, in London by Hollybush Gardens Gallery, and Galleria Zero in Milan, Italy.

To learn more about these artists:

Altoon Sultan’s website:

altoonsultan.com

Short video interview with Altoon Sultan: [visitingartists.com](http://visitingartists.com/collections/altoon-sultan)>collections>altoon-sultan

North Star Monthly article: “First Light” Edward Kadunc Exhibition

“Telephone,” *cont.*

rowed twelve telephones from Bell’s father-in-law and business partner, Gardiner Hubbard, and installed them in five Boston banks, connecting them through a switchboard in his office. The system worked for calls during the day and as a burglar alarm at night. Though short-lived, this was the first telephone exchange.

Gardiner Hubbard’s main task was marketing his son-in-law’s invention, a job he embraced enthusiastically. When the *Boston Globe* published a news story read entirely into a telephone, the stunt drew media attention and helped legitimize the new technology. By August of 1877, there were 778 telephones in operation, and Hubbard founded the Bell Telephone Association.

In time, demand for the new invention surged and Bell Telephone was leasing 1,000 telephones a month. The small business—none of whose founders were actually businessmen—was overwhelmed, and Bell and Hubbard knew they had to find someone to lead their growing enterprise. That person was Theodore Vail, the 32-year-old scion of a wealthy industrial family, who would later play a role in Groton history. Vail was something of a prodigy—only two years earlier he had been appointed as the General Superintendent of the U.S. Railway Mail Service. But he accepted Bell and Hubbard’s offer to become



The first telephone, made by Alexander Graham Bell in 1875. The telephone, i regarded as an amusement, initially struggled to compete against the telegraph. Photograph from the Library of Congress.

General Manager. Within two months he helped establish the National Bell Telephone Company, with \$450,000 in capital and customers using 12,000 of Alexander Graham Bell’s telephones.

The earliest telephones were connected directly to each other in pairs, like Charles Williams’ phone line from his workshop in Boston to his home in Somerville. Soon, people grew convinced that the telephone was not just a curiosity. They wanted to be able to talk to more than one person, so wires were strung on the same lines as other services that required wires: fire alarms, burglar alarms and telegraph networks. This practice soon became unmanageable, with tangles of wires overwhelming telephone poles.

Eventually, users were connected within a system of lines that led to a

Continued on p.6



This 1904 map shows the telephone and telegraph lines across the U.S. By 1910, there were 5.8 million telephones in the Bell/AT&T network, but coverage was uneven, a reflection of economic development patterns of the period.

“Telephone,” *cont.*

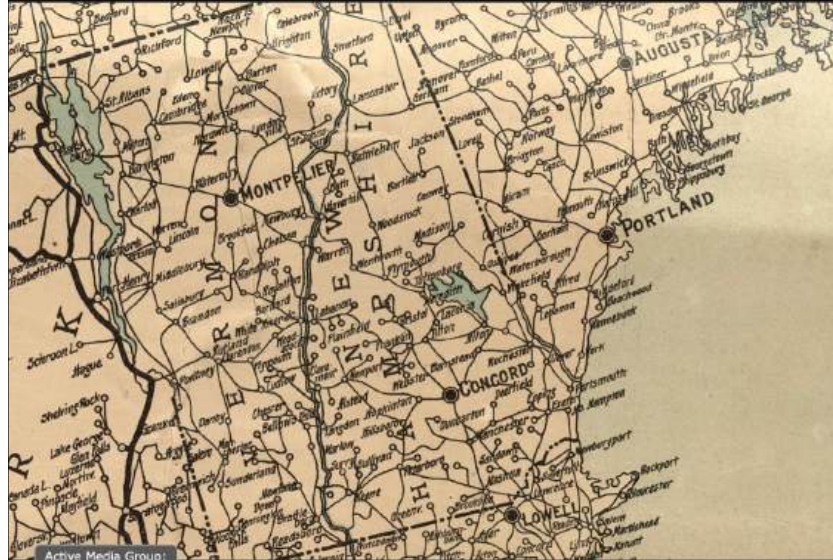
switchboard. This was called an “exchange,” and users paid a subscription fee. The first commercial exchange was established in New Haven, Connecticut, in early 1878; its 21 subscribers paid \$1.50 a month for the privilege of using the new invention.

Hubbard’s “Bell Telephone Association” first faced competition from Western Union, but eventually worked with them, sharing poles and other infrastructure. By 1894, some of Alexander Graham Bell’s patents had expired, and in the following decade, the telephone business exploded. By 1910, according to an article in *Slate* magazine, 5.8 million telephones served the Bell/American Telephone & Telegraph Company network across the United States. While Bell initially focused on business centers in the East, numerous small, independent telephone companies expanded service into rural areas.

How did the telephone arrive in Groton?

As in other communities, both large and small, the first telephones in Groton were private networks, rather than publicly subscribed exchanges. In 1898 Silas L. Griffith, who earned the nickname the “Lumber King of Vermont,” purchased the property that is now Seyon State Park in the Groton State Forest. This brought his timberland empire to more than 50,000 acres and nine sawmills. Each of these sawmills had a small “settlement,” or cluster of buildings that included lumber processing machinery and worker housing. To connect his settlements throughout the state, Griffith paid for some 70 miles of copper wire to connect each mill to the main office, creating what is commonly considered the first telephone system in Vermont.

Though Griffith had the first network, Groton Postmaster Manley Clarke may have had the first telephone. On August 7, 1895, the *Argus and Patriot* newspaper reported: “Postmaster Manley Clarke has had a telephone placed in his house.” It’s not clear where Mr. Clarke’s telephone line terminated. But the biggest name in Groton’s telephone story is Theodore Vail. After his success establishing the National Bell Company, he became a part-time resident of Groton.



Section of 1910 map showing Bell Telephone lines. Groton does not appear on the map, although Newbury has a Bell line.

In 1885 he created the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, known as AT&T, a subsidiary of Bell Telephone. His goal was to expand and promote the company’s long distance service. There is a bit of historical irony in this undertaking.

After Silas Griffith died in 1903, the U.S. Forest Service purchased most of his timberland, which became part of the Green Mountain National Forest. However, Vail bought 200 acres surrounding what he called “Vail Pond” — our Seyon Pond. He remodeled the millworkers’ boarding house on the pond to hold conferences with his associates and connected it by telephone with his office at his expansive estate, Speedwell Farm, in Lyndon. He became a generous benefactor to Lyndon and helped to bring telephone service to the town.

It’s often claimed that Vail’s was the first telephone in Groton, perhaps because it was connected to outside lines. In a 1989 interview with an oral historian from the Vermont Historical Society, lineman Paul Tyler refers to Vail’s connection as “a gold plate line” because Vail could just “pick up the receiver and he’d get Boston.”

Vail’s local presence and his national profile as the founder of AT&T made him one of the more celebrated figures in Groton history. Writer Leighton Wass notes in a *North Star Monthly* article on Seyon Pond that in 1915, Theodore Vail took part in the first transcontinental telephone call, alongside President Woodrow Wilson, Alexander Graham Bell and Dr. Thomas Watson.



Theodore Vail created the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. He bought 200 acres surrounding Seyon Pond from the Forest Service in 1903 and installed a telephone line to connect his property with his estate in Lyndon.



1901 advertisement touting the offerings of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company.

Continued on p.7

“Telephone,” *cont.*

But, how did the telephone come to Groton for regular folks?

Telephone service started in Groton the same way it did for small towns and villages all over New England. At first, people who bought a telephone had it wired from their home to their business, if that was possible. In areas beyond the village, some farmers in the 1890's might have followed the instructions in a manual that explained how they could develop their own telephone systems on a mutual or cooperative basis, according to the NTCA- Rural Broadband Association.

In Groton Village, Marshfield entrepreneur Merton Beckley was responsible for creating an actual telephone exchange. Beckley had founded the Molly's Falls Electric Light Company, bringing electricity to the town, and later telephone service as well.

In 1905 he established a telephone exchange in Groton, contracting the services of the New England Telephone Company. The telephone office moved from home to home, usually set up in the front parlor of the chief operator.

The switchboard operator would come to play a vital role in small towns like Groton, both as a source of information and as an emergency dispatcher.



Merton Beckley brought the first telephone exchange to Groton.

In the next issue of the newsletter you can read about the switchboard girls and what Groton folks remember about the telephone back in the good old days of the party line, when small town Groton really was like a large family.



“The Telephone”

Robert Frost

“When I was just as far as I could walk
From here to-day,
There was an hour
All still
When leaning with my head against a
flower
I heard you talk.
Don't say I didn't, for I heard you say—
You spoke from that flower on the window
sill—
Do you remember what it was you said?”

“First tell me what it was you thought you
heard.”

“Having found the flower and driven a bee
away,
I leaned my head,
And holding by the stalk,
I listened and I thought I caught the word—
What was it? Did you call me by my name?
Or did you say—
Someone said ‘Come’—I heard it as I
bowed.”

“I may have thought as much, but not
aloud.”

“Well, so I came.”

**My apologies for the distorted line
breaks.*



To Learn More:

Baida, Peter. “Breaking the Connection.” *American Heritage*, June/July, 1985.
<https://www.americanheritage.com/breaking-connection>
A look at the telephone business, from Bell's first invention to the break-up of the AT&T corporation.

Casson, Herbert N. *The History of the Telephone*. Project Gutenberg: 2008. Updated 2013. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/819/819-h/819-h.htm>
A lengthy, but engaging treatise on the telephone examining the telephone as “the acme of electrical marvels”

thetelephonemuseum.org
Visiting Maine? Check out the Telephone Museum, in Ellsworth, close to Bar Harbor.

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

GHS Clean-up Day May 21, starting at 9 a.m.

Join us at the Peter Paul House as we observe the annual rite of Spring Cleaning! Clear out the cobwebs and the cluster flies; refresh and renew our wonderful space as we vacuum, dust, rearrange some items and hang our new blackout shades. All members are welcome—a good time will be had by all.

“A Day in Our Village” June 27

Back again this year, by popular demand, excellent leadership and the effort of many, many volunteers.

This celebration of our town and the people who make it a vibrant, supportive community will take place Saturday, June 27, rain or shine.

The Peter Paul House will be open, and Jane Cadwalader, the Vermont State Archivist, will be present to answer questions. Come see our newly acquired painting, “Single Heifer,” by Groton painter Altoon Sultan and a compelling portrait of William Scott, “The Sleeping Sentinel,” by Barnet artist Edward Kadunc. The new display in our Veterans Room will also be ready for visitors.



Groton Historical Society
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