

# LIVING HISTORY



## President's Message

The Ridgefield Historical Society grew out of a desire to preserve what makes the town special — a remarkable history that had its beginnings in the small farming community that arose following the town's settlement in 1708.

Over three centuries, this town has seen a Revolutionary War battle and the transition from a subsistence agrarian society to a more entrepreneurial model. The extension of the railroad into its center brought an influx of both wealthy summer residents and the people who staffed their estates; the contributions of both these groups to the town were many and significant. The huge population growth of the 20th Century changed the town again, even as historians worked to preserve its heritage. Now we greet



The Class of 1929's graduation invitation, carefully preserved.

*Every week, the dedicated volunteers of the Ridgefield Historical Society work with the primary materials of the town's history. It's an endlessly fascinating task, handling and assessing and cataloguing the stories of centuries of Ridgefielders.*

## A Slice of Life from 1929

Among the recent additions to the Society's collection is a 1929 scrapbook that beautifully details a year in the life of Ridgefield High School students at a time when the country and the world was on the precipice of great changes.

The album was the meticulous work of Marion G. Scofield and it illustrates the ordinary lives of young people growing up in a small Connecticut town in a year that was to bring seismic changes to the country.

There's little indication of the impending stock market crash and the looming Great Depression in the senior year photographs and accounts of the class play and the Christmas dance. A class trip to Washington, D.C., a longtime tradition for Ridgefielders, is recorded with

the promise of the 21st Century as Ridgefield continues to expand its arts and cultural offerings while preserving and protecting its past.

When the Scott House opened as a repository for our town's most precious documents, photographs and artifacts, as well as a place for historical research, it was part of a continuing effort to bring Ridgefield's story to life. Our collections are searchable online and we encourage you to take advantage of this service to delve more deeply into what makes this town so special. Through programs and exhibits using archived materials and the donations of our neighbors and friends, we will continue to show what makes Ridgefield such a unique and important place.

— Sharon Dunphy, President,  
Ridgefield Historical Society

images of museums and monuments, and the obligatory class photo on the steps of the U.S. Capitol.

At their graduation, the School Orchestra performed and the Junior High School Girls sang "Whispering Hope" and "Fairy Moonlight." Student speakers included Ruth Schneider, John L. Sullivan and Zuleme Nunzarro. The graduation address was by B. Ogden Chisolm, a member of a prominent New York family, who bought a "summer cottage" in Ridgefield in 1902 and called it Wickopee Farm. A leading advocate of prison reform, Mr. Chisolm spoke to the graduates on "Scaling the Wall."

In a short time, Mr. Chisolm was doing his part to help fellow Ridgefielders during the financial collapse.

"Mr. Chisolm had great compassion for those who were suffering through the Great Depression and felt that he should do something to furnish employment for those who were unable to find it," recalled historian Dick Venus in his Dick's Dispatch series for The Ridgefield Press (copy in the Ridgefield Historical Society archives). "In the mid-30's, he hit on the idea of building a new barn. It should be said that



The fashionably dressed Class of 1929 gathered for a photo on the Capitol grounds during their senior year trip to Washington, D.C. — Donated to the Ridgefield Historical Society by Walter Boyce

the last thing he needed at that time was another barn. However, he felt that in doing this, he was doing his part, as he phrased it, ‘to drive the Depression blues away.’ ”

But at the time this scrapbook record of the Class of 1929 was assembled, the young Ridgefielders were looking forward to their futures, in a “Dreamland of Opportunity,” according to the title of John L. Sullivan’s speech. In the fall, no mention appears of the stock market crash in the news columns of *The Ridgefield Press*, but the situation did prompt a full-page advertisement from New England Furniture, headlined, “Extra! Sales News! Stock Market Crash. Factory Prices Broke, Factory Cut-Price Sale.”

*Marion G. Scofield, Ridgefield High Class of 1929, who was the creator of this book, was born on July 4, 1910 in Pound Ridge, N.Y. She attended Ridgefield schools and graduated from the Kindergarten Training School in Bridgeport before pursuing a teaching career for a few years. She married a fellow Ridgefielder, Howard D. Stevens, and they moved to Florida in 1968 after he retired from the staff of the Ridgefield Savings Bank. (Her brother, Carleton A. Scofield, was for many years president of the Ridgefield Savings Bank.) Mrs. Scofield died in 1985.*

## A Young Editor’s Challenge: A Minister’s Response

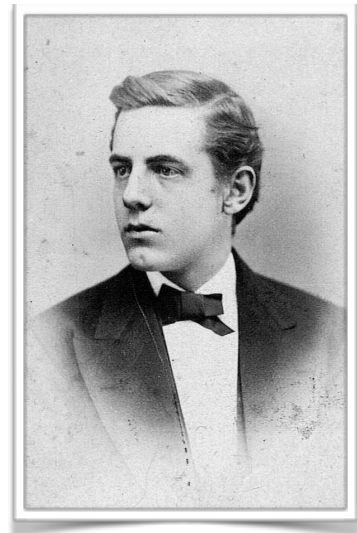
In late 1881, a new editor and owner of *The Ridgefield Press* took the reins of a still-young publication (founded in 1875 by D. Crosby Baxter). In his first editorial, under the motto “Vincit Omnia Veritas” (“Truth Conquers All”), William Wallace Whiting wrote:

“In presenting the first number of the enlarged paper, we have little comment to make. We trust that our subscribers will be pleased with their paper and that they will give it hearty and substantial support. Whatever errors or shortcomings may be noticed in this issue, must be attributed to the confusion and hurry attendant upon so radical a change.”

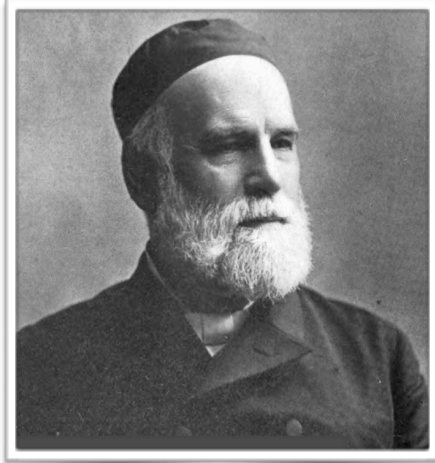
Editor W.W. Whiting, only 25 at the time, had moved to Ridgefield with his wife, the former Catherine Downes of Derby, a year or two before he took over *The Press*. He was the son of a prominent New Haven physician, Joseph William Whiting, M.D., and grandson of Col. George Ingersoll Whiting of the New Haven Grays, a local militia with roots in the 17th Century colony. W.W. Whiting attended Yale University, but was forced to withdraw by illness and soon set off on travels in Europe and the Middle East seeking to regain his health. He and Miss Downes were married in 1878 in Cairo, Egypt.

The new editor set out to make *The Press* “one of the best weeklies in the county.” He offered his opinions in a weekly column and was a strong supporter of upgrading the town’s schools, among other municipal improvements. His commentary on other topics apparently touched a nerve with the minister of Jesse Lee Methodist Church, the Rev. George Lansing Taylor.

**Editor William Wallace Whiting.**



Historical Society volunteers, transcribing the handwritten records of the Methodist church from that era, recently came across some striking commentary by Dr. Taylor. Whiting, the minister wrote, had called him out by name, challenging Dr. Taylor to show anything hostile to Christianity in the paper.



**The Rev. George Lansing Taylor, D.D.**

Dr. Taylor wrote: “The columns of the paper have been an almost incessant battery against the churches, orthodoxy, church discipline, etc., ever since he bought it and his denial and challenge astounds the whole community.”

As might be expected, Editor Whiting had a different view of the situation:

In his editorial of Feb. 20, 1884, titled “Important — If True,” he wrote, “Within the past month, the Reverend George Lansing Taylor, D.D., has twice attempted to make his hearers believe that the Ridgefield Press is inimical to religion and an advocate of infidelity. We regret that the public must either believe his assertions and lament the irreligious influence of the local paper, or believe that a clergyman has been so far blinded by spite and prejudice to make charges for which there is no foundation; but we do not propose to submit to such gross misrepresentation without a protest.

“The Press has never meddled with religion in any way; it is a secular paper, as such it deals with secular topics. The controversies it has had with Dr. Taylor have been invariably upon questions that are not in any way connected with religion—upon such topics as prohibition and social recreations. In other words, all past differences—which we deeply regret and would gladly have avoided—have been distinctly within our province and go distinctly beyond his. When a clergyman enters the field of politics or attempts to dictate as to the home amusements or public recreation of the community, he has no reason to complain at the fair and courteous comments of a public journal, and to attempt to cover his discomfiture by raising the cry of ‘infidelity’ is manifestly absurd.”

Editor Whiting concluded: “If Dr. Taylor wishes to accuse ‘the local paper’ of opposing prohibition, he may do so and welcome; if he takes pleasure in denouncing it as an advocate of dancing, of dramatic entertainments and other harmless recreations, we are absolutely defenseless. When he asserts or insinuates that it is irreligious or anti Christian, we call for proof.”

Dr. Taylor noted in the church records that he forbore from an immediate response, although “It was easy to utterly overthrow him from his own columns, but I had not yet despaired of saving the man, who had many good points...”

However, he continued, “In two weeks, to an hour, from the issue of that paper, Mr. Whiting died, suddenly of pneumonia, one of the most unexpected deaths that could have happened in the town, as he was a vigorous young man, and much addicted to outdoor exercises.”

Dr. Taylor wrote in an aside: “God’s Answer to Man!”

“The announcement of his death was like a thunderbolt to the whole community, and the instant remark ‘that is the answer to his challenge to Dr. Taylor,’ so many people told me,” wrote the minister. “I never saw any community wear upon its face and whole demeanor for days such an aspect of consciousness of the hand of God. It was wonderful. His funeral was a grand parade day for universalists, the Episcopal rector making the strongest universalist speech I ever heard; and a memorial issue of the Press, presenting it all & much more.”

Among the many tributes in *The Press* following his death was this one, by his successor as editor, Charles Lee:

“With trembling hand, and with eyes dimmed by sorrow, we take up the pen that for a few years has been so vigorously wielded for this column. The hand that guided it is still in death, the mind that directed it no longer tenants its earthly temple, the heart that controlled it has ceased to beat, and it seems fitting that some attempt, feeble thought it may be, should be made to record the motives that inspired the late editor of the paper, and estimate his work....

“Mr. Whiting undertook the editorial management of this paper with the idea that he could here find an opportunity to do a good work, that would prove of benefit to the town and from that time to his death he had but this one object in view. He had means and leisure, of both of which he freely gave, with no expectations of pecuniary reward. How well he did his work the successive issues of the paper have fully shown and how much his work was appreciated the universal expressions of sorrow and regret at his death have fairly demonstrated.”

“...While he was severe in his denunciation of the pharisaical in religion, he never uttered a word derogatory nor in ridicule of true piety. No man honored true religion more, no respected its possession more than he. While realizing the extent of evil and willing to advocate all reasonable means to restrict its influence, he boldly opposed the enactment of laws which he felt the public were not ready for, and which, consequently, could not be enforced.”

*W.W. Whiting left a pregnant wife and three small children; he was buried in Derby in the Downes family plot. Catherine Downes Whiting and the children eventually relocated to New Haven.*

*Dr. Taylor, who left Ridgefield in 1884, served a number of churches in New England as a Methodist Episcopal minister. He died in 1903 at the age of 68. He was a poet and wrote the text for 11 hymns.*

## Coming Events

- [Exhibits at Town Hall: Books About Ridgefield and Authors from Ridgefield](#) through Friday, March 29, 8:30 am - 4:30 pm
- [Founder's Home: A Tour and Lecture at the John Jay Homestead](#) Saturday March 23, 1:00 pm - 3:00 pm; Members \$18; Nonmembers \$20.
- Silent Movie Night at Cannon Grange, 25 Cannon Road, Wilton, Saturday, March 23, 7 pm, with Ridgefield Historical Society presentation on early movie screenings in the days before theaters and “talkies.” For information, visit [cannongrange.org](http://cannongrange.org).