

G. Timothy Cranston 's
The View From Swamptown
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The View From Swamptown

Greetings! Welcome to the first installment of what I hope will be a regular feature of this paper – “The View From Swamptown.” I’m going to use this opportunity to introduce myself and to explain (to the unenlightened masses) the where and what of Swamptown.

I was born into one of the first families of Rhode Island. Now, by first families I certainly don’t mean most important. The Cranstons certainly don’t rank up there with the Browns, Goddards, Chafees, Pells, or any of a number of other prominent clans. I’m speaking of first in the chronological sense. There’s been a Cranston residing on Rhode Island soils since 1635 when John Cranston stepped off the proverbial boat in Portsmouth as a young man of twelve years. So, you see, “Rhode Island” is virtually genetically imprinted on all current Cranstons. The South County Cranstons made their way over here from Newport, via Jamestown, in the middle 1700’s. The seafaring Cranstons settled in Wickford and the farming Cranstons made their home in the tangled woods of Swamptown; an ill-defined district in North Kingstown that can best be described as that wild swampy region between Lafayette, Allenton, and Slocum. The colonial residents of Swamptown were bound together only by their determination and their “Swamptown Highway” (largely consisting of the present day Lafayette and Oak Hill Roads) which may have been North Kingstown’s most rural of roads. I was named after Swamptown’s most famous son - George Tillinghast Cranston (my mother convinced my father that Timothy was a wiser use of the letter T than Tillinghast in her estimation). He was a Civil War hero, local merchant and politician, and a colorful character in the “Swamp Yankee” tradition. After the war, he settled in Lafayette village, but remained fiercely loyal to his Swamptown roots

throughout his life. Nearly 100 years after his death, I (by accident or heavenly design) settled with my family back in what was once Swamptown. Sadly, Swamptown like Scrabbletown, Elamsville, and many other North Kingstown villages has ceased to exist in the cartographic sense of the word. But I, like my great great-grandfather before me, plan to remain fiercely loyal to what those forgotten villages (as well as the surviving ones like Wickford and Lafayette) stood for - a spirit of community and family.

As the self-proclaimed spokesman (we swamp yankees don't give a hoot about gender-neutral terms) of Swamptowners, Swamp Yankees, and locals of every stripe, I want to help preserve the memories of those oft-forgotten villages and the determined people who lived in them, and that is what this column hopes to be about. I want to entertain and educate you and I'd like you to return the favor. Drop me a line or, better yet, send me any historical photographs, anecdotes, or interests. I would also like your questions concerning local history. If I can't answer them I'll try to find someone who can.

I look forward to hearing from all of you.

Dedication

Back in May of 1966, an unfortunate and tragic event changed the lives of two very different people; one was a boy of eight years old and the other a man who had just raised his own family and was heading down the golden road to retirement. The boy was the proverbial "tabula rasa", a blank slate, and the man was among the last of a fast-dying breed, a Renaissance man, a jack-of-all-trades, as at home in the deep woods as he was in the business world; a transplanted New Hampshire Yankee who fit into the world of Wickford like he was meant to be here. I was that boy and my grandfather, Paul St. Pierre, was the man. He stepped up, like real men always do, when my own father left this world much too early. He gave of himself without question. He became a father to his daughter's children simply because it was the right thing to do. He put his life on hold in order to give my sisters and myself the guidance we needed. He opened my eyes to worlds that existed all around me, unseen by the vast majority of the uninitiated. He seeded my imagination and forced me to look at things in ways I could never imagine. He taught me of the past and the people who lived in it. All that I am I owe to him. The stories that reside

in this book are as much his as they are mine, and I dedicate this compilation to his memory.

Acknowledgements

The task of attempting to acknowledge and thank all of the people who have helped me along the way is more daunting to me than the actual researching and writing of the 104 articles that reside within these pages. But here goes anyway.

I guess I'll start with the people whom I have pestered the most over the last few years. Without the assistance and encouragement of these folks I wouldn't have been able to accomplish all that I have. Thanks so much to the real town historians, Thomas Peirce and Henry Beckwith I am honored to be counted among your friends. Also many thanks to Althea MacAleer and Doris Moon, for helping me untangle the genealogy of the many souls who have called North Kingstown home. As a matter of fact I owe the whole of the North Kingstown Genealogy Society a hearty thank you for putting up with my many questions. And you want to talk about questions, I'll never be able to repay Susan Berman and her fine reference staff at the library for all the help they've given me along the way. That goes as well for Marilyn and her great planning staff over at the town hall annex. I mustn't forget my good friend Marilyn over at the "Vault" for sharing all those dusty musty ledgers and books with me. Thanks, too, to Robin Porter and John Patterson for all their aid and encouragement. I guess it goes without saying that if it weren't for Kristen and her staff at the North East Independent I'd still be talking to myself as I wander around town. Thanks for taking a chance on an unknown entity and giving me my own piece of the "bully pulpit" to ramble on from.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to all my loyal readers. Your letters and phone calls have kept me going. Your story ideas have more than once excited and amazed me. To everyone who has stopped me on the street or called me on the phone just to give me an "atta-boy", Thank you, it means the world to me. Lastly, I must thank the most important people in the world, my wife and two sons. Thank you for your patience and understanding as I pursue my

passion. Thank you for listening to me as I babble on about another long dead North Kingstownite. Thanks for putting up with all of it. I love you.

Author's Note

What you have in your hand is the unedited text of the 104 articles, which I wrote during the first two years of the existence of the North East Independent. That's right, no pictures, I can't afford to make picture books, not yet anyway. If you want to look at the photos, which accompany each article, I have made it a little easier in that I have included the publication date of each article in the table of contents. What, you haven't saved them all! No worry, the library has a copy of each article, you can see the pictures there. I have also broken out the topics that are in each multi-topic column and listed it under the appropriate heading in the table of contents. Yeah, it's not as good as an index, but it's the best this low-tech guy can do. I won't swear that there aren't any errors in here but I have tried my best to get it right. Please feel free to set me straight if you think I got it wrong. You see, the truth is what I'm really after.

Lots of people have asked me why I do this and I must admit I've even asked myself the same question on occasion. I guess part of it has to do with my desire to leave some sort of legacy behind after I've joined my many ancestors under the cool green grass at Elm Grove. I'm also constantly struck by the realization that every one of the many souls who has trod upon the soil of this town before us was important to some one at some time. They deserve to be remembered. Their very existence matters. They paved the way for us and we owe them a debt. In telling their tale they live again. Enjoy these stories as much as I have.

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