



"This picturesque teahouse is rated by many traveled motorists as amongst the best in New England."
1915 American Cookery Magazine. (Photo, Courtesy of Wenham Museum.)

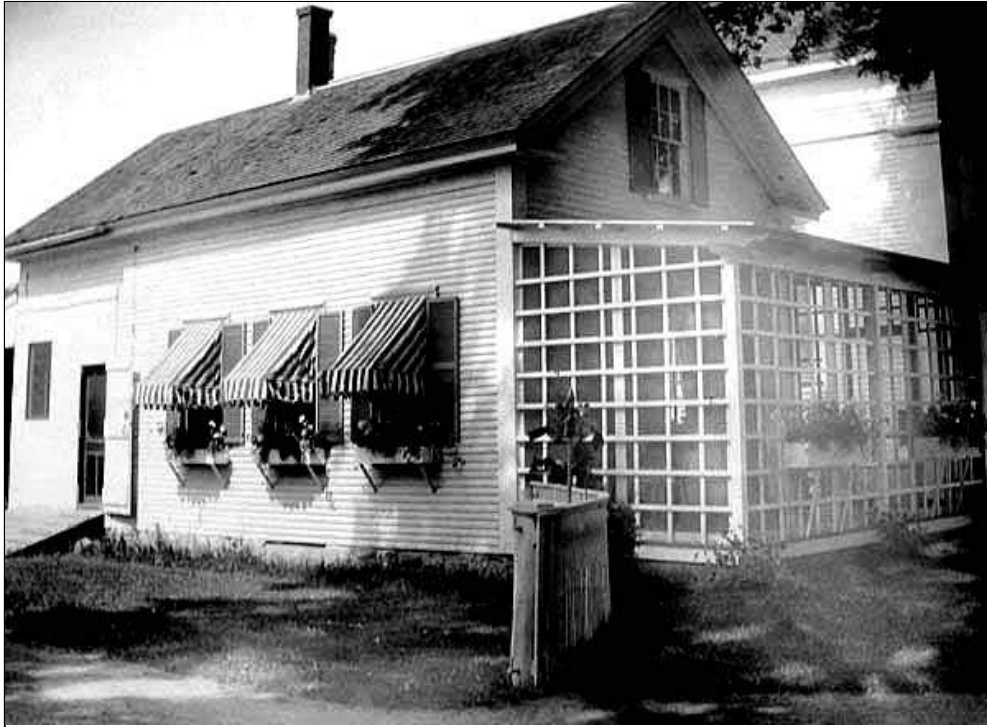
A History of
The Tea House
1912 to 2012

Jack E. Hauck



**In 2012, the Wenham Tea House
became 100 Years old.**

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On May 29, 1912, at the remodeled tea house, on Main St., patrons could enjoy a cup of tea. (Photo courtesy of Wenham Museum)

Wenham Tea House

Wenham has what is believed to be the oldest continually-operating tea house in the country.

The idea of a tea house in Wenham began when, in 1893, the Wenham Village Improvement Society – WVIS - was organized. The aim of the WVIS, as stated in an August 1914 issue of *House Beautiful* “was to eliminate political, sectarian and class prejudice, and to create an enterprise in which there could be a common interest.”

One of these common interests was to make Wenham more beautiful, by planting shade trees and having the downtown area more attractive. The tea house was envisioned as a means for obtaining funds to pay for the town’s beautification programs.

Tea houses were just beginning to be opened in cities: Boston’s Ritz, had its tea garden. So, it seemed that a tea house also might be successful in the small town of Wenham.

Mrs. Thomas Pingree, WVIS President, suggested the opening of a combination tea house and women's exchange. The latter - women's exchanges - also were being opened in many small towns, to provide an opportunity of home employment for women, and funds for the Societies.

Helen Burnham was made the chairperson of the Tea House study committee, and Adeline Cole, the chairperson of the Woman's Exchange.

For several years, the idea was vigorously pursued. However, in 1907, the Ways and Means Committee sadly said that it was "advisable to give up on the idea of a tea house and exchange."

But, the ladies did not give up. Three years later, 1910, a building was found for a tea house. It was the unoccupied harness shop, beside the Hobbs House, and next to the church, and just off of Main Street.

The cost of putting it in condition was to be about \$150. Plus, there would be a monthly rental fee of \$5.

In the autumn of 1911, it was unanimously voted, by the WVIS Board, to move ahead with the opening of a tea house and exchange. A 3-year lease was taken for the harness shop.

The building was renovated – thanks to a lot of contributed supplies and manpower. With a gift of \$5, towels were bought. Tables and chairs were contributed. With a \$10 gift, china and glasses were purchased.

The following year, on the 29th of May, 1912, patrons had, for the first time, an opportunity of ordering a cup of tea, in a dainty room, with soft-buff



Inside the tea room on Main Street, 1915 (Photo, American Cookery)

walls and green trim, and frilly curtains on the windows. Additional windows were cut to let in more light. There were flower boxes below the windows. Patrons entered the tea room through a latticed veranda, having potted flowers.

Inside, there were two rooms: a dining area, at the front, and a kitchen. Around the top of the dining room walls, there were stenciled friezes done in green and white. These depicted various scenes pertaining to tea, and below there were different mottoes, such as: "Unless the kettle boiling be, Filling the teapot spoils the tea," "Tea which not even critics criticize," "Polly put the kettle on and we'll all take tea," and "Here thou, great Anna! Whom three realms obey Dost sometimes counsel take and sometimes tea."

The mural decorations, a dozen, done by Hazel DeBerard, of the New York Museum School of Art, were the most expensive items, in building the tea house.

The furniture consisted of plain pine chairs and tables, painted green, decorated with painted flowers and vines. The predominating color, green, was further carried out in the draperies, which were of heavy fish net. A vase, with flowers, adorned each table.

This was just what the WVIS ladies hoped people would do. With great delight, they would pull right in to Tabby's place.

Visitors can still see the tabby cat sign, which was obtained through a competition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It hangs on a wall, in the dining room. How strange that the ladies of the WVIS chose a sign featuring a tabby cat: it's a name often given to mongrel cats. In 1988, fame came to the *Felis familiaris*, when Massachusetts made the tabby the state cat.

WVIS records do not mention when the "tabby cat" name was dropped, when the sign was brought in, or when the place became the "Wenham Tea House," instead of tea room.

The tea room was open every day, from three to six o'clock, except Sunday, from May to November. Service was provided by girls trained by the WVIS. Each year, prior to the opening of the tea house, the WVIS selected six school girls and trained them to wait on tables.

For the first week of business, expenses were \$20.37 and receipts \$35.71, yielding a profit of \$15.34. That comes to about \$330 in today's dollars. But, the weeks after, saw profits declining.

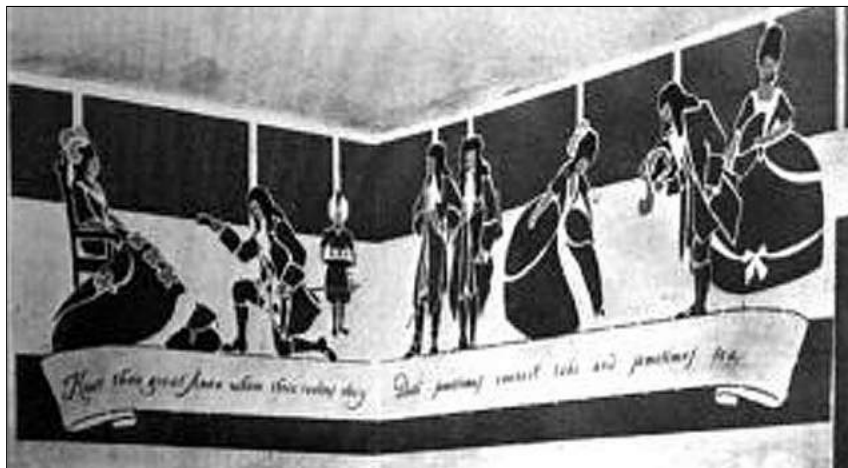
The tea house was open in the mornings, for bridge parties.

Things did not work out as the ladies had envisioned. Travelers, once they were started in their flivvers, kept moving, wanting to get where they were going.

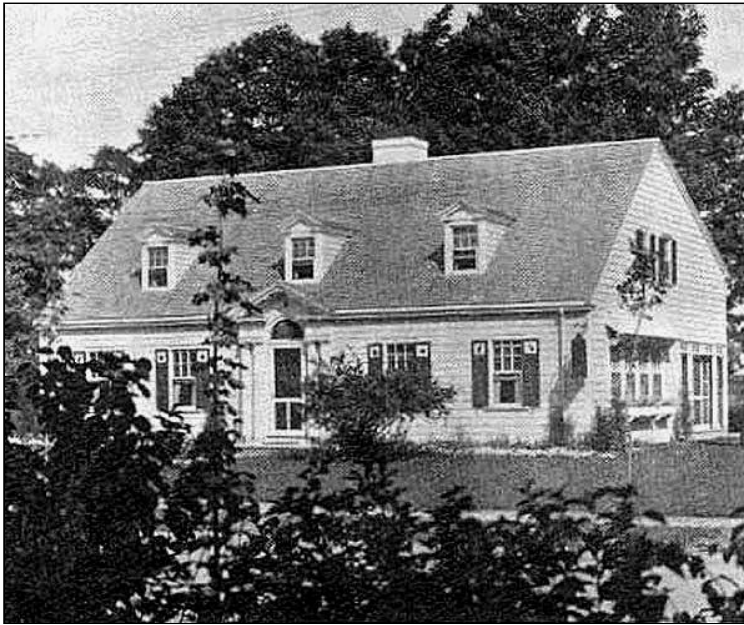
The main constituency of the tea house customers – though not many in number -- were ladies from Wenham and nearby towns. Gradually, more people came for tea and the pastry delights. All of the baked goods were made in the kitchens of local women.



Murals, in green and white, mottoes underneath, depicted royalty enjoying tea.



Murals were stenciled on the walls of the dining room. Below each mural was a motto appropriate to having tea, e.g., as in the above, "Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey Dost sometimes counsel take, and sometimes tea." (Photo, American Cookery)



In 1915, the Tea House Finance Committee borrowed \$6,000, to build a new tea house and exchange on Monument Street. (Photo courtesy Wenham Museum)

Newspaper and magazine articles were very complimentary about the Tea House. A lengthy article, "At the sign of the Tea-Kettle and Tabby Cat," appeared in the November 1915 issue of *American Cookery*.

The Move to Monument

In 1913, the WVIS saw that there soon might be a need for larger quarters. Helen Burnham, for whom Burnham Hall was later named, called for a new tea house to be built. Two committees were formed, a Building Committee, with Mrs. Frank A. Magee, as chair, and a Finance Committee, with Mrs. Adeline Cole, as Chair.

A lot more people, not just those from the Wenham area, were coming to Taby's tea room. There was not a comparable place anywhere nearby.

The Tea House on Main Street, for the summers of 1913 and 1914, earned \$900. (*That's just under \$19,000, in 2009 dollars.*) At the close of the summer season of 1915, business had significantly grown. Helen Burnham said, "We have to go forward or slip backward, as no business can stand still." And, they did go forward.

With regard to a new and larger tea house, Mrs. Magee, Chairman of the Building Committee, said: "We have taken on ourselves a huge task. But, we feel that if every member of this Society will do her part, give her thought and interest and anything else that she is able to, we are bound to make a success. The WVIS has never failed in any of its under-takings, and we are surely not going to fail in this - but we do need the help and cooperation, not of a few, but of all members."

How true Mrs. Magee's words are, in 2010, when the tea house business is faltering, and the co-operation of many, not just a few is needed.

In 1915, the Finance Committee borrowed \$6,000, to build a new tea house and exchange. In 1915, \$6,000 was a lot of money. In 2009 dollars, that would be about \$120,000. To get the loan, some very well-to-do people must have given the bank some assurance of the loan being paid back.

The Tilton property, on Monument Street, was purchased. Herbert Porter erected a cottage. In the mid 1800s, Benjamin C. Putnam's store was on the Tilton site. His store also was the Wenham post office.

For its new tea house, the WVIS ladies voted that, "No drink containing any portion of alcohol (*will*) be served."

In 1916, a "commodious" cottage was built. Most of the space was devoted to serving tea. The exchange was to the left side of the front door. Today, 94 years old, the cottage on Monument is the country's oldest continually running tea house.

What happened to the old tea house?

In 1944, with all its frills and flowers gone, it was leased to a Young Men's Club. A year later, it was closed, due to "mischievous doings.

In 1946, an ex-GI, who needed a house, bought the old tea house and moved it out of town. The lot remains empty, to this day.

In 1916, the Massachusetts Tax Commissioners recommended to Wenham that the Tea House property should be exempt from taxation. Wenham assessors complied. This helped keep expenses down and improved profits.

During the winter of 1917, the Tea House remained open, for community work. The next winter, the Tea House served as a center for war work. Throughout WW1, the Tea House was a center for volunteers supporting the troops serving in France. Surgical dressings were made every Monday, all day and evening.

For the duration of the war, the Tea House was the center of wool distribution for knitting wool mittens, scarves, and sweaters for the soldiers. Hundreds of pounds of wool were stored in the summer kitchen, and chilled workers they must have been.

Very little information exists about the tea house, during the 1920's. The reason for this was explained, in 1956, by Adeline Cole, when she gave a talk to WVIS volunteers. She said that some of the early WVIS records "fell from the attic into a first floor partition of the Tea House." There they presumably rest today.

During the 1920s, it is likely that a small building was erected behind the tea house. Now a storage shed, but during the time when ladies were brought to the tea house by chauffeur driven limousines, the shed was used to provide drink and food for the drivers. (AWD)

An early issue confronting the WVIS was whether the Tea House was to be open on Sundays Helen Burnham said, "It was customary for tea houses to be open Sunday, and this was a business venture." She said that she had been strongly advised that it was unquestionably the course to pursue.

Among those opposing the Sunday opening was Adeline P. Cole. She said, "As an organized society, we are not free to act as an individual, and we could not afford to offend the sentiment of those who might feel strongly, in regard to it. (*i.e., being open on Sundays*)"

At the next meeting, it was voted not to be open on Sundays. The vote for having tea house open on Sundays was: Yes - 19, No - 20.

The Tea House, for many years, also was not open in the fall, winter and spring. This mainly was because travel was not very easy during the winter months. Also, the building did not have sufficient heating, from its center fire-place. And, the open porch and open summer kitchen could not be used. And, most of the help were volunteers, and getting them to work more than the few summer months was not likely.

After the new Tea House was opened, business grew quickly. A luncheon menu was added. But, still no alcoholic drinks.

In July 1916, nearly 1,400 people came for tea. For the summer season, there were over 6,100. That is an average of over 50 people a day. It is said that chauffeurs and limousines, often were parked along Monument Street.

The exchange business also grew. The shop offered unusual products from around the world, and from local people. One of the original aims of the WVIS was to provide an outlet for the home worker for home-made products. In 1942, the Exchange paid local women over \$15,000, for products made at their homes. In 2009 dollars, this is about \$191,000.

In 1953, after the Bessie Buker School opened, the town meeting lunch was moved to the Perkins Auditorium, since the voting and town meeting were transferred to the school. The free meal was a simplified lunch of sandwiches, pie and beverages.

In 1966, the Tea House Food Shop, later named "The Gourmet Shop," was started, and became a great success. One of the original aims of the Society was to provide an outlet for the home worker for homemade products. The "Gourmet Shop," stocked with home-baked food, furthered this aim. Today, the Gourmet Shop is the bakery and has to-go dishes. It's in the area that was a side dining room.

Growth of the tea house business, in the 1970s, called for more space and numerous additions to the original Tea House building. A larger kitchen was built, at the back. At several other times, several extensions were made on the west side.

Altogether, by 2010, three extensions have been made to the Tea House, with each one getting smaller. Additions also have been made to the back of the building. There is no record of when the fence was erected, at the front.

About fifteen years ago, the Tea House offered a large luncheon buffet. While the buffet was large, the number of patrons was not, and it was discontinued.

About ten years ago, there were some major structural changes, to the interior of the tea house. It was hoped that a refurbished interior might draw more customers.

The 21st century has seen fewer Tea House customers.

On Mar. 15, 2007, the WVIS brought in Emma Roberts to operate the restaurant. Roberts, a Wenham resident on Dodges Row, owned Capers Catering, a very successful catering company, out of Stoneham. Capers, voted Best Caterer of Boston, in 1997, by Boston Magazine, began in 1993.

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A unique WVIS custom is serving a luncheon, on Town Meeting day. This takes place, at the Buker School cafeteria, between morning voting, and the afternoon Town Meeting. The first luncheon was in 1921. Voters came to the Tea House for a full course dinner. Roast beef, potatoes, and vegetables, and pie. After enjoying this hearty fare, the voters went to the town hall, a short distance away, on the Village Green.

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In 1932, one hundred and sixty-five people were served a lunch of roast beef, carrots and peas, mashed potatoes, pies of all kinds, doughnuts, coffee, and candy: A lot to eat, before sitting through an afternoon of debates. Until 1974, the town meeting was held in March, so the hot meal was most welcomed.

This custom continued, until World 2, when it stopped. In 1944, the lunch was restarted, but was provided by the local Canteen Corps. They served a

buffet luncheon of sandwiches and pie, at a cost of 10¢ a head, paid for by the WVIS.

In 1931, the Tea House's open porch was enclosed, to become part of what is the present dining area. An extension was made to the other end of the building, to provide more space for the exchange.

On September 28, 1932, the Tea House began to be open during the winter. This change happened during the height of the great depression, not exactly the best time to expand business. WVIS records give no reason for the change. More heating must have been added, but the records do not say when. It probably was a furnace, for in 1941 the shortage of oil forced the WVIS to cut down the use of oil for heating the Tea House and Historical House. Also, the summer kitchen must have been enclosed.

On December 31, 1932, the WVIS reported that, "The old year passed out, at the Tea House, when an open house was kept. About 100 young people danced, while 35 older people played cards, as the last hours of 1932 drifted into history."

Changes

The biggest change in the tea house of today, from the original tea house, is the people who make it go. When Tabby's Tea Room and the Women's Exchange began, aside from the table servers, early all the help were volunteers, who ardently worked to make the venture a financial success. These women were from all sectors of Wenham's population.

Many Tea House workers offered their services over long periods of time. The longest tenure was that of Mrs. E. L. Mitchell, of Hamilton. In 1933, she started working at the Tea House. In 1943, she became the Director of the Tea House and the Exchange. She retired in 1973, after nearly 40 years with the Exchange, the Tea House, and the Hobbs House.

About twenty years ago, the number of volunteer staffers at the tea house and exchange began to decline. Now, there is one, but she only comes in for a day, each week.

The original Exchange is gone. There is a small gift shop, in the entry foyer. Most of the space that had been the Exchange now is the Irresistibles, which offers contemporary clothing, jewelry and accessories for women.

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The Wenham Tea House and Exchange, in 2010, remains a major source of funding for many public service projects in the town. (Photo J. Hauck)

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owned Capers Catering, a very successful catering company, out of Stoneham. Capers, voted Best Caterer of Boston, in 1997, by Boston Magazine, began in 1993.

About two weeks after Emma Roberts took control of the Tea House, a public hearing was held by the Board of Selectmen to determine if the Tea house was to become the first business in town, for a long, long time, to receive approval for a liquor license. The last liquor license was held by Lummus' Tavern, which was on the corner of Larch and Main. Lummus' was closed with the coming of prohibition.

Good thing Adeline Cole was no longer around. First, the WVIS opened the Tea House on Sundays, against her advice. Now, the tea house was serving alcoholic beverages, also against her fervent advice.

Discussions for the liquor license initially handled by the WVIS, but later Emma Roberts took the reins. In a presentation she made to the Selectmen, she said, "We're not planning to be a bar. We just want to let luncheon customers have wine, or perhaps a Tea House punch." The Selectmen approved the State's issuance of a liquor license to the Tea House, but only for serving of alcoholic drinks with meals.

Later, in the summer of 2007, the Tea House began offering dinner on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings, from 5 to 9 p.m. However, the dinner service did not last long, due to the low number of customers.

In the spring of 2008, breakfast began being served at the Tea House. And, what a great breakfast it is. Prices are low, and the coffee is great. All the baked goods are fresh and made on site.

The biggest change in the tea house of today, from the original tea house, is the people who make it go.

The tea house and the gift shop, at the entrance, are operated by Emma Roberts and she provides the help. The one time a year, when all the helpers are volunteers is Town Meeting Day, when a luncheon is served, at the Bucher School cafeteria.

Another big change, in the tea house of today, is the motivation behind it.

The original "cherished dream," of the WVIS, was to have a place where women could come to leisurely enjoy tea and sweets, and perhaps buy some gifts, for their family and friends. Profits would be used to buy trees, shrubs, street signs, street lights and remove weeds, to beautify Wenham's Streets.

This they did for many, many years. In 1880, Dr. Myron Allen called Wenham a "glorious temple." In the following century, the women of the WVIS made Wenham even more glorious.

The Wenham tea House continues to be a means for generating funds for the WVIS. But, not for beautifying the streets. Funds now are sought to provide for the education of young people, seeking to go on to college. The

WVIS also maintains the tennis courts, on Monument Street, and each summer runs a children's camp, near the Tea House.

In 1950, following the death of two Wenham women, Anne and Harriet Mandell, the WVIS began giving out \$300 annually to further the education of Wenham boys or girls. Today, the scholarship funds come from WVIS income, and by gifts and donations. Since its start, the WVIS program has awarded over a half million dollars in Mandell Scholarships.

In September 2011, an Adeline Cole memorial was erected at the front of the Tea House. She had been a member of the Wenham Village Improvement Society for 63 years, founding the Wenham Historical Association and Museum, co-founding the Wenham Tea House and Exchange, serving the Wenham Library as a Trustee for 15 years, founding the Visiting Nurse Association (VNA) of Hamilton and Wenham, co-founding the International Herb Society, and leading home-front activities during World Wars I and II.

In December 2011, the tea house again was without a manager. After five years, Emma Roberts did not renew her lease.

At the end of March 2012, the Tea House reopened as "The Wenham Tea House featuring Henry's Fine Foods." The Tea House hours being Tuesday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and weekends from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., which will include brunch.

Private parties are hosted after 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, and after 2 p.m. on Sunday for events such as bridal showers, birthday parties and engagement parties.

Chris Keohane became the Tea House's operations manager. The Tea House resumed tradition of tea service with British-American style tea with white glove service. Loose-leaf tea will be steeped at the table and brewed at the correct temperature.

The kitchen was completely updated, with a new floor and new kitchen equipment, including an oven and stove.

In June, construction began for a 25-by-50-ft, outdoor, patio extending off the dining room, which added 70 outdoor seats to the restaurant's 55-seat dining room.

The former overflow dining area became a small deli counter, where people can buy some Henry's baked goods and a few groceries. The, gift shop at the front of the Tea House, also reopened to sell and display local art.

The Tea House is a quiet place where families can come to enjoy delicious and healthy meals, and should they wish, a glass of wine, their favorite brew, or some punch.

The Tea House still offers afternoon tea service; however, the tea time is late afternoon, as it should be, according to English custom. The full tea is in

courses: first scones, then sandwiches, and finishes with sweets. In 2007, when the Afternoon

In February 2012, Wenham Town Meeting unanimously backed a pouring license for the Wenham Tea House. On Oct. 19, 2012, the Tea House received the license from the state government.

The license allows the Tea House only to serve liquor with food from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday, 10 a.m.-10 p.m. on Saturday and 8 a.m.-11 p.m.

WVIS Gifts to Wenham

The original objectives of the WVIS - town beautification and many other public service projects - could not have been met without a substantial and an ever increasing income. These funds, from the very beginning, were largely provided by earnings from the Tea House and Exchange.

Over the many years that the WVIS ran the Tea House and Women's Exchange, the Society made many contributions to the Town of Wenham. Here are a few of the more notable gifts:

- In 1916, hired a boy to keep Main Street clean he put out rubbish barrels cleaned Main Street, once a week.*
- On November 2, 1921, bought the Richards house," for the Historical Committee to "maintain the antiquarian atmosphere of the house."*
- In 1928, built the first tennis court was built, for the benefit of the townspeople.*
- In 1935, opened a playground, to provide summer recreation for all youngsters in the town.*
- On September 23, 1952, opened Burnham Hall. It is used by town groups and individuals, as well as for activities of the Wenham Historical Association.*
- In 1959, gave \$5,000 toward the purchase of the "Trowt lot," at the corner of Friend Court and Main Street, for the building of a combination fire and police station.*
- In 1972, a gift of \$1,500 for the Cherry Street walkway.*
- In 1975, gave the town \$4,000 for recreational purposes, an extension of the Cherry Street walkway, and for the use of the town's Bicentennial Committee.*

(NOTES: *Afternoon tea* was not originated by the English. Afternoon tea, according to a monthly newsletter called the "Tea Muse," was originated by the French. Tea first arrived in Paris, in 1636, more than 30 years before it appeared in England, and it quickly became popular among the French aristocracy.

High tea was originated by the English during the Industrial Revolution. Working families would return home, tired and exhausted. The table would be set with various meats, bread,

butter, pickles, cheese and of course tea. Because the meal was eaten at a high dining table, rather than the low tea tables, it was termed "high" tea.

New Englanders, during the Revolution, drank *Liberty Tea*. It was made from boiled whorled loosestrife leaves, which were steeped in the liquor of the stalks and, then, dried in an oven. Liberty Tea replaced imported tea, on which there was a heavy tax.)

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"Wenham in Pictures & Prose," Wenham Historical Association & Museum, Inc., 1992.

"Notes on 1643-1943 Wenham History," Adeline P. Cole, Published by the Wenham Historical Association, 1943.

"At the sign of the Tea-Kettle and Tabby Cat," Edna Eaton Hurlburt, *American Cookery*, Vol XX, No. 4, November 1915.

"The Tabby Cat Tea House," Elizabeth L. Adams, *House Beautiful*, August 1914.

Wenham Tea House to Pour First Drink with New License Saturday, Robert Gates, *Hamilton-Wenham Patch*, Oct. 19, 2012.

Updated 06-01-2014



The dining room consists of what originally was the open porch and a portion of what was the original dining area. (Photo, J. Hauck, 2014)



Gift shop, welcome desk and refrigerated meals-to-go cabinet are in the entrance area. (Photo, J. Hauck, 2014)



At back of entrance area baked goods are offered. (Photo, J. Hauck, 2014)



Patio dining, with seating capacity for 70, began in 2012. (Photo, J. Hauck, 2014)



Visitors to the tea house can still see the tabby cat sign, on dining room wall. (Photo, J. Hauck, 2010)



Front counter and entrance to private dining area are just inside the front door. (Photo, J. Hauck, 2014)



Former overflow dining area became a reserved dining room, in 2013. (Photo, J. Hauck, 2014)