

---

# *Wallingford Perspectives*

Published Quarterly by the Wallingford Historical Society, Inc.



## *President's Message*

By Joyce Barbieri

Greetings and happy 2015! We are pleased to publish another wonderful article written by John Rumbold. Thank you, John.

If you have any ideas for talks this summer, e-mail me at [ottercreek@vermontel.net](mailto:ottercreek@vermontel.net).

Thank you all for your continued support.



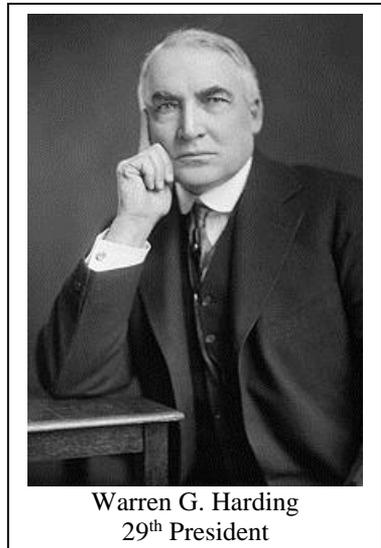
## *Tragic Deaths on the Gulf Road*

by John Rumbold

Theodore Roosevelt was planning to run for President on the Republican ticket in the 1920 election. Teddy had ascended to the Presidency on September 14, 1901 after the assassination of President McKinley. He was elected to a second term in his own right in 1904. He choose not to run again but had always thought of doing so after his dissatisfaction with the progressives under President Taft and with Wilson's policies about the Great War.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Teddy died in his sleep on the Night of January 5, 1919. Woodrow Wilson's vice president, Thomas Marshall, said that "Death had to take Roosevelt sleeping, for if he had been awake, there would have been a fight."

On November 2, 1920, the Republican Warren Harding from Ohio was elected as the 29<sup>th</sup> President with Vice Presidential running mate Calvin Coolidge of Plymouth Notch, Vermont. At the Republican convention that year, Harding was chosen as an inoffensive compromise candidate. He promised America a “return to normalcy”, with an end to violence and radicalism, a strong economy, and independence from European intrigues – i.e. The Great War. Harding was a conservative in comparison to the progressive Theodore Roosevelt. Harding beat out Democratic candidate James Cox and his running mate Franklin Roosevelt.

The Harding administration was beset by a multitude of political scandals with many of his appointees ending up in prison. In June 1923, Harding set out on a cross-country Voyage of Understanding, in which he planned to renew his connection with the people.

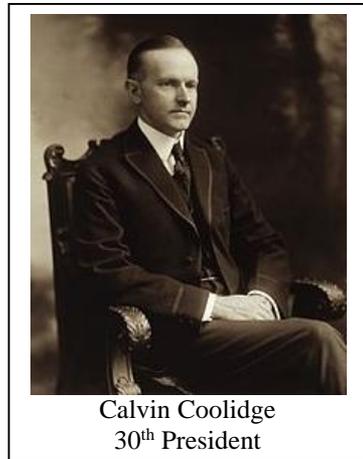


Warren G. Harding  
29<sup>th</sup> President

Harding’s physical health had declined since the fall of 1922 but he endured a physically demanding schedule with many speeches along the way. The trip included a tour of Alaska by sea followed by stops in Vancouver, Seattle, Portland and San Francisco. At the Palace Hotel in San Francisco, he developed pneumonia and he was severely exhausted. Although he seemed to be improving a few days later, on the evening of

August 2, 1923 in the middle of a conversation with his wife, Harding shuddered and died.

On the same day, Vice-president Calvin Coolidge was visiting his family home in Plymouth Notch, Vermont, which had neither electricity nor a telephone. Word of Harding's death reached the Coolidge home by messenger in the night. Coolidge dressed and came downstairs to greet reporters who had assembled. His father, a notary public, administered the oath of office in the family parlor by the light of a kerosene lamp in the early morning of August 3, 1923. Coolidge became the second president from Vermont, following Chester Arthur who, strangely enough succeeded to the presidency upon the death of President James Garfield on March 4, 1881 by an assassin's bullet.



Calvin Coolidge  
30<sup>th</sup> President

The Coolidge farmstead in Plymouth Notch soon became a popular tourist destination resulting in a considerable increase in vehicle traffic on the Gulf Road crossover between Wallingford and East Wallingford, on to Grahamville and up to Plymouth Notch.

---

James Headley Congdon settled on the Sugar Hill section of Wallingford, Vermont in 1804 where he farmed what was to become 140 acres. He had relocated from North Kingston, Rhode Island where he was born in 1779. He was the seventh of ten children of James Congdon and Lydia Hedley. His older

---

sister Rachel also settled in Wallingford with her husband George Sherman sometime after January 1799<sup>ii</sup>.

About 1805 James Headley married Lorenza Ives. They had one child on August 25, 1806. Sadly, both child and mother died in childbirth. About 1809 James married Lorana Phillips. They had four children. Only Lansford Witherel and James Headley, II survived to adulthood. Lorana Phillips died in 1815. About 1816 James married Lydia Brock. They had nine children, seven boys and two girls. Lydia Brock died in 1837 only two and a half years after their ninth child Phillip Potter Congdon was born. It has been said that during the haying season it was quite a sight to see 'Uncle Hadley,' as he was called, walking toward the hayfield, followed by nine sons, each over six feet in height, with scythe upon shoulder. 'Over fifty-four feet of Congdon was the common way of expressing it.'

James Headley's father James was still living in North Kingston, Rhode Island when he came to Sugar Hill at the age of 87 in 1829 to visit his son. James fell ill and died on February 16, 1829 at his son's home. He is buried in the Sugar Hill cemetery. His wife had predeceased him in 1817 in North Kingston. James came from a long line of Congdons in North Kingston. His second great-grandfather, John Congdon was born in Pembrokeshire, Wales about 1600 and immigrated to Virginia about 1638. John had three sons. Son John settled in New Jersey and son David settled in the Boston area. Both shortened their names to Condon. Son Benjamin settled in Rhode Island and it is from his issue that James Headley is descended.

James Headley Congdon had fourteen children by his three wives. His namesake, James Headley Congdon, II was born to

---

Lorana Phillips on April 2, 1815 in Wallingford, probably on Sugar Hill. James Headley, II married Artemisia Dawson and they had nine children. Three of the children died in infancy and one died as a child of eleven. Children Langford and Lurana died before reaching the age of thirty. Daughter Delia was murdered in the farmhouse on Sugar Hill on July 24, 1908<sup>iii</sup>. Her parents had predeceased her in 1900 and 1902. Delia's two brothers John Tabor and George Abner survived her.

John Tabor Congdon was born in 1853 and had married Elva Graves from Mt. Holly, Vermont in September 1874. In October 1879 John and Elva moved to Sedgwick, Kansas with their three children. Elva died in Sedgwick on February 20, 1922.

George Abner Congdon was born in 1856 and had married Marcella Keyes from Wallingford in December 1878. They had two children, Roscoe Lansford and Laurana. They were lifelong residents of Wallingford.

---

By July 1923 John Tabor had retired from his occupation as a stone mason in home construction in Kansas. His wife was already dead when he was about to turn 70 on August 6 and his youngest child James was 44 years old. He decided to make a long visit to Wallingford to spend some time with his only living sibling and brother George to celebrate their August birthdays. He imagined it would be one last chance to get together as they were both advancing in age. He arrived in Wallingford from Sedgwick, Kansas about July 20. His brother George was a farmer in town and three years younger than his brother John. They celebrated John's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday on August 6.

On August 30 it was George's 67<sup>th</sup> birthday and it was decided that the two brothers, George's son Roscoe and James Derrick<sup>iv</sup>, second cousin once removed of George and John, would go for a picnic perhaps to the White Rocks picnic area or to the old farm or cemetery further up on Sugar Hill Road. Roscoe was driving the Essex touring car, presumably belonging to his father George as they headed up the Gulf Road (Route 140).



Typical Essex Touring Car of the Time

They were going up “the steep pitch which starts near the first sharp curve at the gulch when suddenly [they] came upon a Studebaker touring car driven by Maurice Hawkins, a young farmer who lives near the top of the mountain between the villages.” As the vehicles passed, their rear hub caps “clicked” one another.

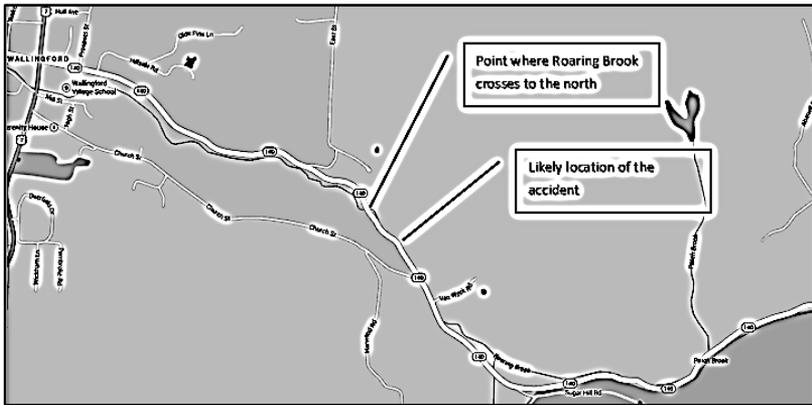
What happened next is conjecture but it was thought that the sound of the cars scraping attracted Roscoe's

attention and as he looked behind he lost control of the Essex. “Mr. Hawkins brought his car to an immediate stop, but the



Typical Studebaker Touring Car of the Time

Congdon auto sped on 30 or 35 feet, crossed the highway to the left, went through a few stones piled beside the road and toppled over into the 15-foot ravine, turning completely over [wheels up on the rocky bed of the river which winds its way parallel to the highway] and instantly killing the two Congdons in the rear seat and Mr. Derrick, who was in the front seat with the driver.”



Most Likely Location of the Accident.



Possible Location of the Accident as Described by Stories Passed Down to Fred Thurlow (The white stones were not there in 2009 and likely not the same in 1923).

Roscoe Congdon was seriously injured in the crash with “a severe cut on his head and [is] otherwise bruised and lame but is expected to recover. At his home in Wallingford [that same] afternoon, [Roscoe] Congdon told his version of the tragedy to State’s Attorney, Charles E. Novak and a state automobile inspector, who were on the scene a half hour after the accident happened.”

“Mr. Derrick, Congdon said, was riding on the front seat with him and ‘we were going I should say about 20 miles an hour for as I best remember I was just about getting ready to shift gears. We came onto the other car, both of us in the middle of the road at the time. We both turned out and I saw who it was. Our front ends passed but our rear ends clicked and I pulled to the right side of the road, but suddenly, I don’t know why, the car shot across the roadway and at the bank we seemed to hover a few seconds.”

“It seemed to me if there had been 10 or 15 pounds on the upper side of the car we would not have tipped over. The next I remember was crawling out from under the car. I saw Jim there and I sat him up against the stone wall, not thinking he was hurt but dazed and then I looked up and saw Hawkins. We looked again and saw the others were hurt and we then started for doctors. They had to help me up the bank by this time.”

“Further in his story Mr. Congdon reiterated again and again that there could be no blame attached to the driver of the other car. The Hawkins car sustained dented hub cap and bent fender, but otherwise was not damaged.”

“There are several theories as to what might have happened. Some believe the Congdon car was going at a rapid rate of speed in order to make the grade and when the cars struck the

---

driver lost control of his wheel, swerving to the left and over the embankment. The highway at this point did not show the application of any brakes. From the probable point where the cars struck to the point where the Congdon car went in to the ravine is about 35 feet and from the point where the car left the bank to the rear of the machine as it lay overturned in the ditch is about eight or nine feet, indicating some momentum at least.”

“First Selectman Hiram Fales was notified and he gave permission to have the bodies of the three men moved to the Congdon undertaking rooms in Wallingford, where in the afternoon an autopsy was performed at the order of State’s Attorney Novak.”

“In the Hawkins car were his father-in-law, Frank Jewell, and his nephew, Howard Hawkins. No one in the machine was injured.”

“About a week ago, it has just been learned, a Keene, N.H. machine traveling down the grade did not notice the dangerous stretch in the roadway and the machine was driven into the ledge embankment, destroying it.”

“Since this time the selectmen have had signs, “Bad Curve,” posted at both ends of the gulch and there were in place yesterday, although this has little bearing on the accident as both drivers were familiar with the highway, both having been born and reared in the locality.”

“Mr. Congdon had driven a machine for six years and Mr. Hawkins for a number of years. Pending further investigation of the cause of the smash and death of the three men the

driving licenses of both operators were picked up by the authorities yesterday.”

Thus ended another generation of Congdons from Rhode Island.

John G. Rumbold is half first cousin twice removed of John and George Congdon.

Note: The quoted text was mostly taken from the Congdon Chronicles which took some of the information from the Vermont Herald.

---

<sup>i</sup> At the time there was no limitation on the number of terms a president could serve. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment was ratified in 1951, limiting presidential terms to two elected terms or two years plus one elected term.

<sup>ii</sup> Other Congdons from Rhode Island settled in Clarendon before 1799 and likely formed the impetus for James and Lydia to come to Vermont.

<sup>iii</sup> See: <http://www.wallingfordvt.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Murder-on-Sugar-Hill.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> James Derrick is the great-grandson of Rachel Congdon, sister of James Headley Congdon.



*The past is no row of bare facts waiting to be memorized by school children. Nor does it stand in our back yard like an old picket fence, slowly and silently rotting. The past is a real world, inhabited by villains and heroes and regular folk passing this way on swift journeys. Their story is our story—the tie that binds each generations to all the others.*

(from a speech by Bill Moyers)



Family Dues ..... \$15.00 per year

Individual Dues ..... \$12.00 per year

Please make dues checks payable to WHS and mail to,  
WHS % Joyce Barbieri, 662 Creek Rd.  
Wallingford, VT 05773.

Wallingford Historical Society, Inc.  
% Joyce Barbieri  
662 Creek Rd.  
Wallingford, VT 05773