

# WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

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*At the time of this photograph, about 1895-97, the Coburn block was occupied by W.G. Wark, harness maker (left storefront), W. T. Burrage dry-goods store (center storefront), and a grocer (right storefront). In 1898, Benjamin R. Parker opened a hardware store in the left storefront..*

## 110 years of Hardware History Ends

*Last spring, Paul Puopolo, owner of Puopolo Hardware Company, announced he was closing his store and retiring. Since that time, Puopolo has been gradually selling off the store's inventory, everything from candles to cookware, along with hardware, of course. With the impending departure of Puopolos, for the first time in 110 years there will be no hardware store at 450 Boston Post Road in Weston Center.*

## *B. R. Parker's Hardware and Bicycle Shop*

In 1898, Benjamin R. Parker (1861-1930) opened a hardware and bicycle store in Weston's first "business block." Farmer Edward Coburn had constructed the handsome three-storefront commercial building a few years earlier in an area that would become the town's commercial center. Parker previously worked at the school furniture factory on Crescent Street and is listed in town vital records as a cabinetmaker. His wife Florence was the daughter of local builder William Nelson Gowell, and the couple lived at 25 Conant Road at the corner of Gowell Lane, in a house built by her father. The Parkers had two children: Elizabeth, born in 1892 and Benjamin, born in 1895.

Parker began by selling hardware, paints and oils, bicycles, and bicycle sundries. He also repaired bicycles and, as early as 1905, was busy with automobile repairs. His brother, Horace, ran an auto and small appliance repair business behind

Telephone 209-4, Waltham.		<i>Weston, Mass., July 1 1903</i>	
<i>Mr. John B. Paine</i>		<b>To BENJ. R. PARKER, Dr.</b>	
<b>HARDWARE, PAINTS AND OILS,</b>			
BICYCLES AND BICYCLE SUNDRIES. BICYCLE REPAIRING. * * * * *			
CENTRAL AVENUE,		WESTON, MASS.	
<i>June</i>	<i>1 1 quart hoe</i>	<i>85</i>	
	<i>4 17-16" bar</i>	<i>96</i>	
	<i>13 1 can enamel</i>	<i>15</i>	
	<i>1 .. carriage paint</i>	<i>40</i>	
	<i>22 2 sets tire screws</i>	<i>20</i>	
		<i>256</i>	<i>256</i>
<i>Paid by Parker</i>			

*In 1903, John B. Paine paid \$2.56 for five items, including a grub hoe and a can of carriage paint. (Courtesy Weston Historical Society)*

*Advertisement from  
the 1915 Waltham  
Suburban Directory*

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# **BENJAMIN R. PARKER**

— DEALER IN —

**HARDWARE, PAINTS AND OILS**

**AUTOMOBILE AND BICYCLE REPAIRING**

**SUNDRIES AND SUPPLIES**

Telephone Waltham 1392M.

**CENTRAL AVENUE - - - - WESTON, MASS.**

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the store. A 1906 newspaper item noted: “Mr. Parker’s automobile garage is so full that the next one that comes will have to go on the roof.”

Horace Parker once told employee Jim Dolan that in the first decade of the 20th century, the store purchased five-gallon cans of gasoline for Brenton H. Dickson Jr., who had one of the first cars in Weston. Because of concerns about the volatility of the gas, the cans were stored in the stream behind the garage. Later, Parker installed a Socony (Standard Oil Company of New York) gas pump in front. Some claim this was the first gasoline pump in Weston; however, Elsie Cooke of North Avenue claimed the same distinction for the gas pump at her father’s store, James T. Foote’s, on North Avenue. The 1920s gas pumps had a calibrated five- or- ten- gallon glass cylinder at the top. The attendant would pump the requested amount of gas into the cylinder and from there it was gravity fed by hose into the car gas tank.

After Benjamin R. Parker died in 1930 at age 69, Parker’s Hardware continued as family business under the proprietorship of his widow Florence and, later, children Beth and Ben Jr. Horace continued to operate the garage behind the store in the swamp land that still exists there. Beth also ran a kindergarten/pre-school from the family home on Conant Road. The Parkers employed a store manager, a position held by Norman Johnson in the 1930s, Roy L. Dickson in the early 1940s, Henry Ward from 1944-45, and John Childs in the late 1940s.

## ***Parker’s in the 1940s***

Jim Dolan (Weston High School Class of 1948) started working at Parkers as a teenager in 1945. At that time the manager was Henry Ward, an older man who was in charge during the war years, when there was a shortage of manpower. At the request of the *The Bulletin*, Dolan wrote down his memories, quoted below:

“Learning the ropes meant discovering where everything was hidden in an old country store. The street floor was presentable but the cellar was such a mess (Mr. Ward —with arthritis— didn’t like the stairs), that we had precious pre-war hardware, lawnmowers and steel tools, etc. hidden and discovered in late 1945.

“In 1945, after the war, Miss Parker intended to hire an ex-clerk, now ex-soldier to come back as manager at \$25.00 a week, a low salary even for the time. When he declined the job, the Parkers hired John Childs, a gentleman from Sudbury. He was a wonderful person who made friends with the new townspeople and upgraded the appearance and profitability of the store. Numerous consumer products were coming back to the market: Revere Ware, Silex Coffee makers, Power Lawn Mowers, plus many new appliances. The critical test was keeping up to the big department stores, in style, availability and price. We were jokingly called the “Out House” due to the great wealth of goods in the advertisements. We never could satisfy the consumer’s appetite fully.

“I worked after school, on Saturdays, and during school vacations, for thirty cents an hour. As a youngster, I was at first shy but enjoyed the hardware trade, the visiting salesmen, and the many wonderful families that traded at Parker’s. Several veterans and businessmen became my mentors and helped me understand the adult world at this point in my life. I started at Northeastern University in 1948 and worked part-time at Parker’s through the Co-op Plan. Tom Bolduc of Watertown was my alternate Co-op student. I went on to New York in 1953.

“During the post-war years, Elizabeth Parker came every evening to close the books at the store. We closed at 6 p.m. and “rolled up the sidewalk,” meaning that we took in the hardware, rakes and tools, and oil racks that were on outside display. Beth totaled the receipts and the hand written charges (no credit cards-then) and tallied the gasoline pump records with payments. Credit was offered freely and watched closely by Beth. Many people charged their purchases, paying the account monthly, with few disappointments.

“Beth’s brother Ben would visit with his wife and daughters once a month, on Saturday after 3 PM, to fill up his big Buick and leave after a polite “Hello.” Ben was an accomplished state highway engineering manager, stationed in Worcester. He was a big brother in demeanor [although he was younger] and undoubtedly helped in hiring Mr. Childs and good garage mechanics that were sometimes hard to find. Under the auspices of Beth, Ben, and their Uncle Horace, the store was a much appreciated small-town family business carried on like their dad had fashioned it.

“Horace and the garage mechanics had to be all-round mechanics who could fix any car, truck, lamp, or anything else mechanical. Certain frugal customers would abuse the garage’s services by calling Horace to pick up their car for an oil change and service after a big snowstorm. He

would have to plow their driveway to reach the car, and that was exactly what they wanted: two services for the price of one.



“In the spring the emphasis was on sharpening reel-type lawnmowers. The typical homeowner used a push type “hand mower,” which cut a 20" swath of



*Benjamin R. and Florence Parker lived at 25 Conant Road at the corner Gowell Lane in a house built by Florence’s father, builder William Nelson Gowell. Daughter Elizabeth (Beth), pictured above, later ran a nursery school at the house. (Photos courtesy Mary Ellen Sikes)*

*1949 Advertisement  
from a Friendly Society!  
program.*

**BENJAMIN R. PARKER**

**450 Boston Post Road, Weston**

**Telephones: WALtham**

**5-1392-M Store; 5-1392-J Garage**

**Hardware — Benjamin Moore Paints**

**Lawn and Garden Tools**

**Socony Gas and Oil**

**Automobile Repairing —**

**Complete Lubrication**

**Official Inspection Station**

**Lawn Mower and Tool Sharpening**

lawn. Parker's sold the Great American mower, an expensive, heavy cast-steel design. It was considered the very best in quality and construction. Yearly, a critical reel sharpening was required as the mechanisms would become jammed, rusty, and near impossible to use if not properly tuned-up. Parker's Garage was the only shop locally with a precision sharpening machine. Hence every spring there would be an back-log of machines needing to be sharpened, Horace would disassemble each mower and align the reel into the machine—a tedious yet critical job. He would not allow others to operate the sharpener.

“The power mowers used by estates and golfing clubs were much larger "gang-type" assemblies, much as are used today where manicured lawns are required. Some were operated manually, others were tractor driven. Reel mowers of either type leave a more trimmed, uniform cut.

“About 1950, power mowers were introduced for the home-owner. These were four-cycle Briggs & Stratton gas engines driving a reel-type mower, quite heavy and expensive. A manufacturer named Lawn-Boy introduced

a lighter two-cycle engine that became very popular. Soon thereafter rotary mowers replaced the reels as simpler, less costly, and easier to maintain. Mr. Childs took special delight in demonstrating the rotaries. It was a “man’s toy” that only a man (in those days) could operate. I was not permitted to. Ironically the Green movement has re-introduced the reel mower as more eco-friendly, Heaven knows who will sharpen them.

“Our 1944 gas pumps were standard mechanical gasoline pumps located on the rear of the sidewalk, with overhead pipes that could be swiveled, attached to hoses hung on the pipe. High test was attached to the telephone post. Large Mobil oil tankers delivered the gasoline to two tanks that were underground, adjacent to the store. Sometimes an eager customer would trigger the lever in error and shower himself with gasoline. Gasoline was 5 gallons for \$1.00, “cheaper than shipping water from Texas,” we claimed.

“All cars had the oil checked as it was considered very normal to burn a quart of oil with a tank-full of gas. In 1944 Parkers had 55 gallon barrels of oil in the cellar, and every day we used a metal spout to fill glass bottles with oil. Denatured alcohol, linseed oil, kerosene, and turpentine was also stored in these drums and sold in glass containers, or tin cans provided by the customer. The new management under John Childs modernized this area. After the war, in 1946, the oil companies supplied cheaper throw-away glass containers. My claim to fame was being named “The Glass King,” as I smashed the company truck loaded with seven trash barrels of glass bottles at the Wellesley Street/ South Ave intersection. Police Chief Sumner Viles just happened to be following me and with fatherly assistance helped me clear up the mess. The old truck, a Model A Ford known as the “Bird Cage,” was laid up for the winter in recovery.

“Jimmy Roberts, an Air Force veteran, and his uncle joined the ranks about 1953 with the intention of buying the business. “

Ted Coburn, whose great-grandfather built the building, recalled how Horace Parker would make house calls to help Weston residents whose cars wouldn’t start on cold winter days.

In the post-Parker’s period, the store had several names and owners. In the 1970s, it was known as The Weston Hardware Company. After being purchased by George Levy, it was renamed Chandler Levy Hardware, consistent with the Newton Center store that Mr. Levy also owned. Long-time residents say that nothing really changed.

## *The Puopolo Era, 1980 to 2008*

Paul Puopolo bought the business in 1980-81. He initially named it Quality Hardware Center, but later changed the name to the more personal Puopolo Hardware Company. He focused the retail side of the business on high quality goods and name brand manufacturers. He also ran a large commercial business supplying paper products, janitorial supplies, institutional chemicals, and lighting to area institutions. Puopolo explained his retail success this way:

Weston is a community with high income, high consumer demand, and high expectations. Residents have always been able to get a broad range of products at the store. Most retailers would never commit to the extent of inventory we considered routine. We sold everything from tape measures to televisions, and from sea salt to Swiss watches.

Customers could enjoy both classical and opera music—Paul Puopolo's favorite-- playing in the background. "We had folks who shopped on Saturday afternoons just so they could enjoy the live Met broadcasts while losing themselves in the store," he recalls.

According to Puopolo, the closing of small local stores like his reflects larger changes in the world economy. Hardware stores and general stores are community based. Until recent years, hardware stores had a very low rate of failure. The problem today, Puopolo explains, is that manufacturers who make good quality products are increasingly going out of business or cutting back on the number of products they make. Rubbermaid, for example, used to make over 1600 consumer products. Now they have to compete with the Container Store and Walmart, which carry cheaper imported plastic goods. The Rubbermaid Company, after being re-structured several times, has been forced to scale back on

### THE WESTON HARDWARE CO.

450 & 462 BOSTON POST RD.

KITCHEN TOOLS

PAINT



*1967 advertisement in the Weston High School Yearbook.*

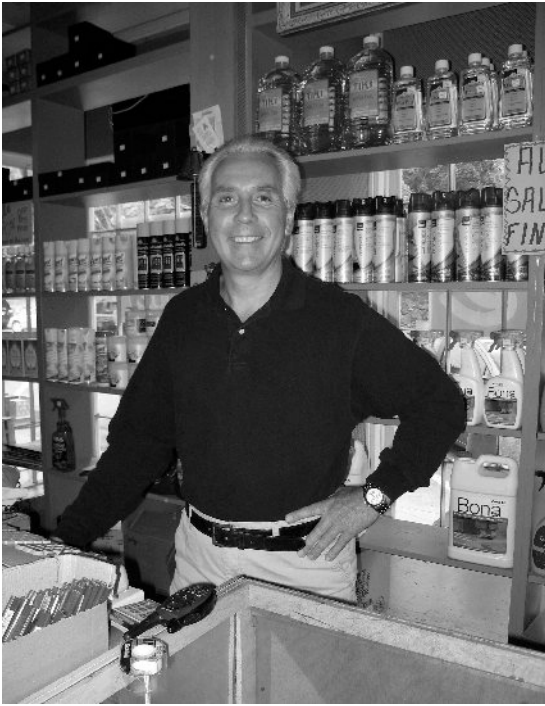


their product lines.

The big box stores have a major impact on the distribution of goods. Traditionally, there have been three levels of retailers: large national (for example, Sears or K-Mart); large regional (like the now-defunct Lechmere Sales); and small local stores such as Puopolos and the recently departed Diehls of Wellesley. Now there are fewer secondary- and tertiary- level stores. Stores are either very large or they go out of business. The major national chains carry fewer products. Big manufacturers stop making their higher quality, lower volume products because there are too few outlets.

Puopolos carried Baldwin Brass, Colonial Candle, Radio Flyer, Rubbermaid, as well as Weber Grills, Ariens power equipment, Stanley hand tools, Cabot stains, and Swiss Army Brands, to name a few of the brands found on its shelves. Several of the products are gone as we knew them, and most of the others are under siege. Baldwin Brass closed their Pennsylvania factory and ceased production of decorative accents and lighting. They have since moved their scaled back hardware production to China. Colonial Candle has eliminated sizes, styles and colors to remain competitive with low cost acrylic candles coming out of the Pacific Rim and Asia. As companies change, Paul Puopolo notes that he cannot continue to supply customers with the same quality brands. He gives another example, Weber Grill, which used to have a large percentage of the US grill business but is now struggling to maintain a fraction of their market share. Competitors have Weber models replicated in China at far lower cost with predictable consequences. Brands become less relevant and as a result, Puopolos Hardware Company becomes less relevant. Says Puopolo, "Ultimately, I made the decision to close the place down and retire from the hardware business, to preserve our legacy rather than compromise our products or our services. I have too much respect for my business and my customers than to start selling junk. It is simply not what we do."

According to Puopolo, hardware stores are becoming increasingly rare. In the MetroWest market area alone, there used to be 35 or 40 hardware stores. Most are now gone. This is not only because of competition with stores like Lowes or Home Depot. What customers don't see is the more insidious problem with loss of manufacturers and/or the curtailment of product lines. At Puopolos, people used to be able to find products they couldn't find in another venue. The smaller store could make a niche for itself by selling specialty low-sale-volume products. For example, Radio Flyer makes the typical red child's wagon, which is very common, but they also make wagons with wooden sides and wheeled toy boxes with removable sides. Walmart is not going to carry these, but Puopolos distinguished itself by looking farther down the product line. Weston customers will lose access to these products.



*Paul Puopolo (left) is closing his hardware store at 450 Boston Post Road (below) after more than a quarter century. (Photo by Pamela W. Fox)*

On-line sales have also cut into business. Paul Puopolo notes that when manufacturers start competing with their dealers, there is attrition in the dealer network, even though in his opinion the cyber community can never replace real community, people, places and activities.

In the end, says Puopolo, "well made, well designed products differentiated our store from



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competitors. If quality is obsolete, so are we.”

### *Customers Say Good-bye*

Puopolos has been a touchstone in the life of the community for many years. Customers have been coming into the store to talk about old times and what the store has meant to them. Older town residents have been shopping here for decades. Even children feel connected to the store where they picked out sleds and classic yellow Tonka trucks at holiday time. Paul Puopolo’s guest book now holds dozens of farewell messages including this one from author David McCullough, a resident of Martha’s Vineyard who has been coming to the store several times a year for decades, when he visits his local dentist:

What a great store—in the grand, old way of first-rate goods & friendly, knowledgeable service. We’ve enjoyed being one of your customers & we’ll miss you. . . .

Another customer wrote: “You claimed a space in the heart of the community.”

*by Pamela W. Fox*

## **Folk Art and History in Weston Family Registers**

*Early this year, the Weston Historical Society purchased a Livermore family sampler and family register that had surfaced together in a local antiques market. We thank members and friends who contributed toward this important acquisition. By fortuitous coincidence, WHS board member Mary Gregory found an online exhibit of family registers created by the New England Historic and Genealogical Society. NEHGS owns a second Weston register, created for the Hews family. Mary found a third Weston-related example in the book *The Art of Family: Genealogical Artifacts in New England* by D. Brenton Simons and Peter Benes, published by NEHGS in 2002. This article is based on research from that book supplemented by material from WHS archives.*

Printed and freehand family registers became popular during the late 18th and early 19th century, evolving from notations in the family Bible. Probably the best-known examples were created by Pennsylvania Germans and were known as *frakturs*. New England examples are similar in content but differ in decorative style.