

MATHER HOMESTEAD ALL STAR TOUR RECAP

On March 1, 2020, Mather Homestead guests joined “All Star” docents Gordon Hastings and Donn Smith for a tour of the Homestead.

First, tour guests gathered in the main hearth room for stories of the Homestead told by Gordon Hastings. The Homestead was built 1778 when the land at the corner of Brookside Road and Stephen Mather Road was wilderness, with the occasional Indian path. There was no heat, no electricity. Everything happened in the main room where the fireplace served as a place to cook and the main source of heat – even babies were born nearby in the adjacent “borning” room where newborns would be kept warm.

Gordon took us back to before the Mather Homestead was built when many colonists came to America during the “great migration” (1620 to 1640), during which Puritans flocked to America from England. These were people who were escaping a tyrannical King who persecuted those who were not part of the Church of England. They came to New England, as well as Ireland, the West Indies and the Netherlands, following John Winthrop, in order to practice their own religion as well as to escape the economic depression in England. They sought a new life. But imagine the hardships! In 1635, Richard Mather walked onto a dock in Bristol England to get on a ship with his wife, four children and about 150 other people. They had no idea where they were going and knew that they might not make it. These people had true grit! Fortunately, the boat landed in Ipswich, Massachusetts with none dead.

Richard Mather became a preacher in Boston and procreated rapidly. We all know one of the Mathers of this day – Cotton Mather, the minister of Boston’s Old North church, who influenced the 1692-93 Salem Witch Trials.

The Mather family grew in prominence in Boston and Increase Mather became the first President of Harvard College, leading the college from 1681 to 1701. The family were all clergymen. But Richard Mather, grandson of Rev. Richard Mather, decided it was not for him and went to Lyme, Connecticut to become a farmer.

After a few generation of farmers, Moses Mather was born. He decided he did not want to be a farmer and returned to the family roots. He earned a divinity degree at Yale and then went in search of a congregation, landing him in Stamford, Connecticut where he become the first minister of Middlesex Parish Church, now First Congregational Church of Darien.

Moses Mather became caught up in the spirit of the revolution and became an outspoken zealot for the revolutionary cause. But remember, half of the people around him were Tories! He remained resolute that America should become independent and this became the center of his fiery sermons. In fact, five times the British came across the sound from Long Island and imprisoned him in the middle of his sermons.

Moses Mather decided to build the Mather Homestead in 1778, two years into the Revolutionary War, as a safe house – far from the shoreline where the British would raid. It turned out not to be so safe. It was also away from the center of commerce where land was becoming tight – and in town, the family home had no room for his growing family. While he was away, likely at war, the house was raided. His wife had hid the silver in the water well as well as in a high boy in the dining room. The valuables in the well were found, but those in the high boy were spared. As if this wasn't all bad enough, the soldiers made her cook dinner for them before leaving!

Two generations later, Stephen Mather was born in California, but he summered at the family Homestead. He became a successful businessman at the Borax Company and is credited with creating the “20 Mule Team Borax” marketing jingle. Stephen Mather suffered from bipolar disorder and sought nature as an antidote. He became highly influenced by the work of John Muir, a naturalist, and became intrigued by ideas of conservation. He was dismayed that the National Parks were not maintained, accessible and used. He lobbied for the establishment of a bureau to operate the national parks, resulting in the creation of the National Park Service in 1916. Stephen Mather became its first director in 1917 and served until 1929. He is credited with doubling the park area in the US, adding the Grand Canyon, Bryce, Zion, Arcadia, Hawaii and Mt. McKinley (Denali), developing an appreciation for their scenic beauty among the population, and setting up a system of Park Rangers to protect the parks and educate visitors.

Back at the homestead, Stephen Mather is now buried in the Mather Cemetery Darien.

Mather tour-goers then moved to the Dining Room, Living Room and upstairs where Donn Smith shared his knowledge of the many “treasures” he has discovered in the house. Please visit <https://www.matherhomestead.org/hidden-treasures> to read about these treasures!