The Barnard Bulletin
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A VERMONT WRITER

BY MARGARET EDWARDS

This column is an offering of The Danforth Library in Barnard and a chance to introduce a Vermont writer who deserves wider renown.

Scott Nearing **1883 – 1983**

Scott Nearing, age 35, in an illustration for *NY Call,* 1918.

The writer and orator Scott Nearing transformed Vermont. He didn't mean to do so. He was born, brought up and educated in Pennsylvania; most of his one hundred years were spent elsewhere than in Vermont; and he died in Maine. But in middle age, in 1932, this vigorous and driven man turned away from what he called "Western civilization" and, with the woman who became his second wife, bought a medium-sized Vermont farm and large forest tract for $4,700. Together they began—very consciously and deliberately—to lead a life of rural self-sufficiency as vegetarians. For nineteen years, while homesteading, Scott Nearing kept meticulous records of all their accomplishments and setbacks. The result was a book, *Living the Good Life*, published in 1952 "by Helen and Scott Nearing." The voice behind the prose is Scott's, without a doubt; but Scott was a feminist—and Helen's dedicated help had earned her equal credit.

Scott Nearing's grandfather had been a mining engineer who moved to the heart of Pennsylvania coal country in the mid-nineteenth century. Winfield Scott Nearing's fierce ambition, industriousness and air of command quickly elevated him to the position of superintendent of a large coal mining concern. Scott Nearing's father became a mild-mannered stockbroker who managed the family's fortune; Scott's mother, more intellectual, with a sensitive, artistic nature, guided her son's education. Although Scott inherited his authoritative grandfather's hard-charging, intense personality, he developed under his mother's influence a passion for reading, a love of nature and a respect for the arts, as well as a keen compassion for the underprivileged.

His formidable social conscience got Scott Nearing into trouble all through the first half of his life. He went to University of Pennsylvania's law school, but soon dropped out in disgust with what he called its "corporate bias." He was sure that unfettered wealth stifled initiative. He then studied oratory at Temple University in Philadelphia while enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business. At Wharton, he embraced the pedagogical principles of Prof. Simon Nelson Patten and applied his sharp mind to economics—a new field of study at the time.

With a PhD in Economics, Nearing taught both economics and sociology at Wharton and Swarthmore. He advocated an economics divorced from the popular capitalist concepts of competition, individual initiative and private property. Social ills like poverty and war, he believed, were simply a failure of economic policies based on greed. He based his "economic republicanism" on "four basic democratic concepts—equality of opportunity, civic obligation, popular government, and human rights.

From 1908 until 1915, Scott Nearing taught with flair, gave many stirring speeches, and wrote voluminously. In his classes, in his public lectures, and in print, he advocated an aggressive social activism. An interesting aside is the fact that Nearing came across the 1905 board game called *The Landlord's Game*, devised and patented by Elizabeth Magie, and found it proved useful in his classroom, helping him explain certain concepts in economics. (This game was the forerunner of the ever-popular 1935 board game *Monopoly.)*

Nearing's biographer Stephen J. Whitfield makes the point that University of Pennsylvania's board of trustees was "heavily stacked with bankers, corporation lawyers,

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financiers, and corporation executives, and Nearing's writing had not gone unnoticed…" Nearing brushed aside all warnings. "His tenuous situation had been exacerbated by [his] open letter to *The North American* in which he challenged the right wing evangelist Billy Sunday to apply the Gospel to the conditions of industrial capitalism." In June of 1915. Nearing's teaching contract was not renewed, and his dismissal became a *cause célèbre* among progressives on the faculty. Even some conservative professors were disquieted by such obvious disregard for academic freedom.

The rupture with Penn did not end Nearing's teaching. He was soon hired by Philadelphia's Toledo University where he taught social science from 1915-1917. But as the First World War raged and America prepared to enter it, Nearing's pacifism inspired him to join the American Union Against Militarism. He wrote pamphlets and gave speeches against the "preparedness" being advocated by President Woodrow Wilson. Very soon "war fever" put an end to his teaching, and again Nearing was dismissed by an academic board.

Next Nearing moved to New York City and founded the People's Council of America for Democracy and Peace, a pacifist organization. He also joined the American Socialist Party and, for the next six years, taught economics and sociology at the Socialist Party's Rand School. He was a prolific speaker, once calculating that he gave at least two hundred public speeches during the war years. He was becoming a famous radical.

After the war ended, in 1919, Nearing was brought to court and tried for writing against militarism, thereby allegedly impeding the US government's ability to recruit troops. But the jury dismissed the charges after Nearing eloquently explained to them that he had never "impeded conscription," only written against militarism—as was his right under the Constitution's First Amendment. His logic as he addressed the jury was clear:

> *The only way to have intelligent public opinion is to have discussion, and the moment you check discussion, you destroy democracy…The Constitution does not guarantee us only the right to be correct, we have a right to be honest and in error. And the views that I have expressed…I expressed honestly. I believe they were right. The future will show whether or not I was correct, but under the laws…every citizen in this country has the right to express himself…on public questions.*

Always his clarity of thought and expression made Nearing's arguments compelling. He was a radical force to reckon with.

The development of Russia's communism interested Nearing, and in 1925 he spent two months touring the Soviet Union to witness the "experimental stages" of its economic and social revolution. There the new theories were being tested. Back home, he wrote a book of his impressions entitled *Education in Soviet Russia*. The next year, in 1927, Nearing made his first trip to Asia and stayed in China for three months. There was enough violence and turmoil to give him pause. The book that emerged from his observations was *Whither China*? Now his opinions were backed up by his extensive travels. His public speaking tours on the lecture circuit were being booked by an agent, and he made a living as a prominent voice of the American left.

But speaking tours dried up in the 1930s. The Depression deepened, Nearing's agent retired, and Russia's Stalin was proving himself no figure of enlightenment. Nearing's ideal of the communal benevolence of Russia and China collapsed. He had already quit the Socialist Party in 1923. He was expelled from America's Communist Party (CPUSA) in 1930, after he wrote a study of imperialism that did not conform to the Party's ideology.

At that point, Scott Nearing, who called himself a "radical," was becoming quite sure he did not belong as a member in any club, union, academic faculty, or political party. In his article "What Should the Radical Do?" he made this clear:

> *The Communist radical of today will be the administrator of tomorrow, and the Communist Society will need the radical as badly as the capitalist society needs him now. It will then be the business of the radical, as it is now, not to take an appointment as Justice of the Supreme Court, not to perform any particular function as a part of the established order, but to stand apart and speak his mind about the established order.*

So he would "stand apart," refusing to join any "established orders." But where did that leave him? What could he do?

Enter Helen Knothe. When she was 17, she had been brought to a meeting at which Scott Nearing spoke, and she'd been bored. Then she met Scott "again" in 1928 when she was 24. Much later she would describe herself as she was then as always an avid and omnivorous reader, but not a college graduate. She had been trained in music, had grown up in comfortable circumstances, was vegetarian (as were her parents), but had no political opinions or social theories. And yet opposites attract.

In her book *Loving and Leaving the Good Life* (1992), she makes their differences clear:

> *Scott had dedicated himself to promoting the general welfare of his fellow citizens and country, yet he had been thrown out of academia and was socially and politically ostracized, his career in ruins. He was a social leper, alone and outcast even from his family, when I entered his life. Protected, carefree, nonchalant …my bourgeois background had hardly prepared me for an attachment to this rugged and determined radical [of 45].*

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Helen Knothe as she looked in 1928.
She had been born in Ridgewood, NJ, in 1904.

Homesteading in Vermont on the land Scott bought in Winhall (near Stratton) began for them in 1932. They nurtured a friendship first, often sleeping in the woods and fields before they began to build their Forest Farm. Scott wrote in the introduction to *Living the Good Life:*

> *When we moved to Vermont we left a society gripped by…unemployment, falling a prey to fascism, and on the verge of another worldwide military free-for-all; and entered a pre-industrial, rural community. The society from which we moved had rejected in practice and in principle our pacifism, our vegetarianism, and our collectivism. So thorough was this rejection that, holding such views, we could not teach in the schools, write in the press or speak over the radio…*

Although Scott uses the pronoun "we" throughout the book, it's a thin disguise for a first person narrator—himself.

Scott Nearing had their shared objectives clearly in mind: to live economically as independent of commodity and labor markets as possible; to maintain and improve their health with homegrown, organic food; and to dissociate themselves from "the plunder of the planet, the slavery of man and beast, the slaughter of [humans] in war and of animals for food." They hoped to make their living with their hands, yet spare time for leisure and "avocational pursuits." There would be no accumulation of profit or reliance on unearned income. They would respect life and build an economy devoid of any exploitation—no use of animals or animal products or "chemicalized" fertilizers. They would value simplicity and self-reliance. They would honor barter over the exchange of cash. They would shun all debt.

Shunning debt was possible because Scott Nearing bought the Vermont farm and land outright. And how had an untenured professor, a left-wing orator, writer of radical books, and divorced father of two managed to accumulate enough capital for such a purchase, comparatively small though it was? Accompanying his meticulous descriptions of stone construction, drainage methods, and the creation of compost piles, there would be no open account of the finances of the farm. In her 2003 book *Meanwhile, Next Door to the Good Life*, Jean Hay Bright revealed that both Helen (in 1934) and Scott (in 1940) received substantial inheritances. This money was carefully used over time to support their farming. Bright's calculations make clear that the cash crops of Forest Farm never supported the Nearings as they maintaned.

Scott Nearing had always been a person of order and self-discipline. He did not rush into projects suddenly—he worked out the *what* and *how* and *when*. Helen was, in her words, capricious and whimsical, but she conformed to Scott's ways, and together they accomplished a lot. Scott describes the methodical way of bringing idealism to bear on reality:

> *We tackled our practical problems one by one, as we reached them. In each case we followed a pattern that began with a survey of the situation, continued with a discussion or series of discussions which led to a decision, often written down in memorandum… The decision was elaborated into a plan, although written out and often revised. Finally the plan was checked and coordinated with our ten-year plan, adopted as a project and fitted into the work schedule.*

Perhaps this method could seem "over-organized"—but it proved the way to get things done.

The Nearings repaired the buildings they had bought, of necessity, but over time tore them down and built stone houses and stone fireplaces. They improved the soil with compost; created spring, fall and summer gardens; cut all the firewood for their winters; began and then expanded a business of maple-sugaring; and they regularly canned and preserved. Over time, the publication of descriptions of what the Nearings were doing "as an experiment" attracted numerous followers, some transient but others very dedicated. These guests slept in a large guesthouse. Each workday on Forest Farm was divided into four hours of "bread labor" (on construc-

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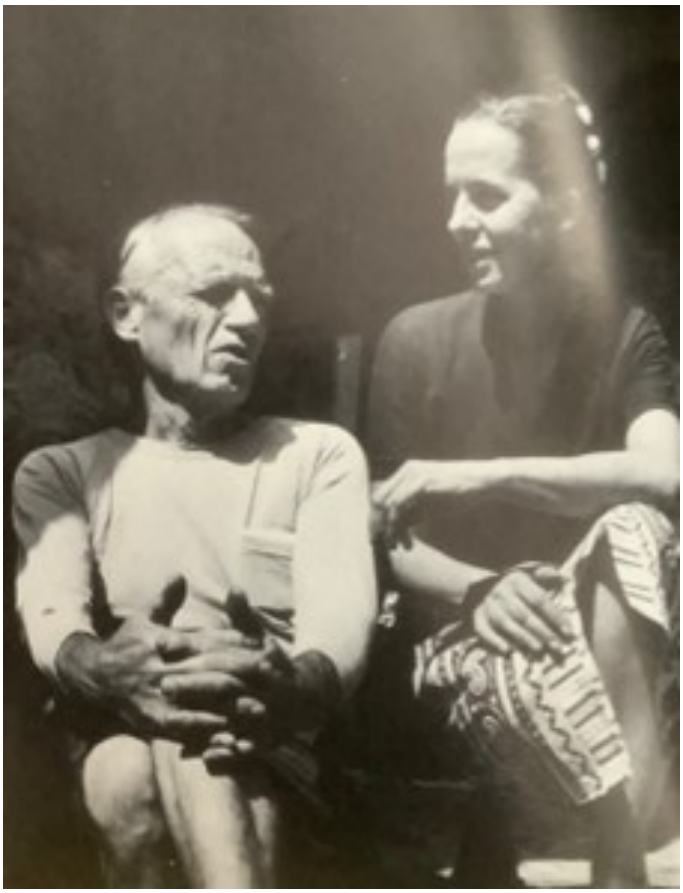
tion, gardening, wood-gathering, sugaring, etc.) and four hours spent on personal projects (reading, writing, practicing music, sewing or whatever). A communal midday meal bisected the two four-hour stints. Weather determined which of these two periods would be dedicated to bread labor.



Scott and Helen Nearing on their stone patio at Forest Farm in Vermont, 1951.

Scott and Helen Nearing held fast to ideas and ways that were definitely not shared by their Vermont neighbors. Over the years, the couple and their many guests were carefully observed, gossiped about, occasionally befriended, but never emulated. For one thing, they ate their strange diet out of wooden bowls with chopsticks. But most bizarre to the dairy farmers who surrounded them was their attitude toward animals, which Scott made clear:

> *We prefer, in our respect for life, not to enslave or exploit our fellow creatures. Widespread and unwarranted exploitation of domestic animals includes robbing them of their milk or their eggs as well as harnessing them to labor for man. Domestic animals, whether cows, horses, goats, chickens, dogs or cats, are slaves. Humans have the power of life or death over them. [They can] buy them, own them, sell them, work them, abuse or torture them and have no compunction against killing or eating them. They compel animals to serve them in multitudinous ways. If the animals resist, rebel or grow old, they are sent to the butcher or shot out of hand.*

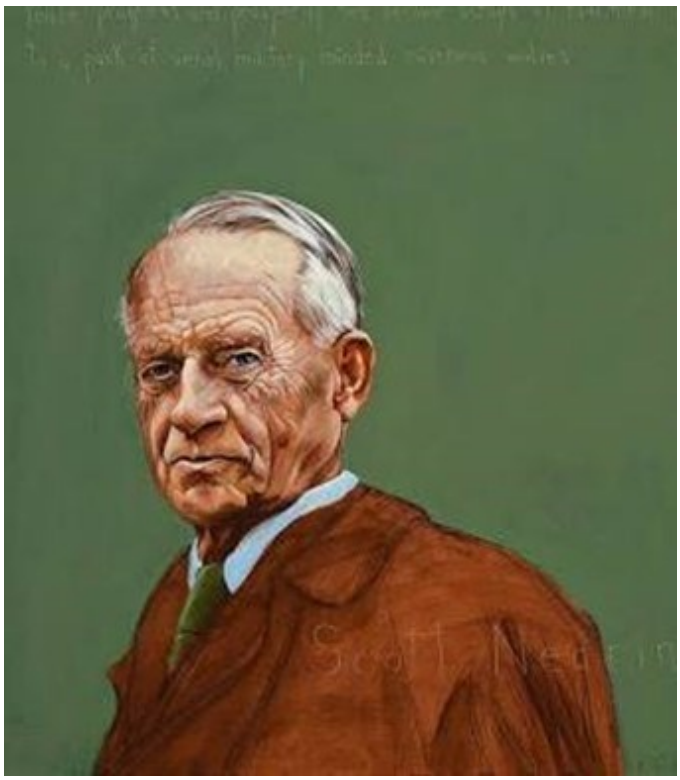
Cats and dogs, any pets, in Nearing's analysis, were mere "dish-fed retainers," whereas wild animals in their independence had far more dignity and beauty. The Nearings did not hunt or fish for sport. They respected "*all* animals."

Vermont farmers' lives, by contrast, were geared to a laborious tending of animals and raising food for them. The Nearings, by preferring to be without such dependents, had found in farming a lot more free time for themselves.

And Scott was honest enough to admit that he and Helen, having no children, were also free of human "dependents."

In the 1950s, the coming of the Stratton Mountain ski area, and the development of large tracts of surrounding land, put an end to the Nearings' happiness on their Forest Farm in Vermont. They wanted a more private, sequestered, quiet place to live their lives and continue their "experiment." They left Vermont in 1952 to create another, similar Forest Farm in Maine.

The Nearings' silence with regard to the financial backstory of their farming years might be more damning had they not shown a stunning renunciation of a "killing" they might have made as they pulled up stakes and left Vermont. Their 750 acres had appreciated remarkably, from $2.75 per acre to $8,000. According to Mark Bushnell in a 2019 VT Digger article, the Nearings could have sold their land for at least six million dollars; but instead, they donated it to the town of Stratton for use as a municipal forest.



A portrait of Scott Nearing in his early 80s.

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The final chapter of the eventually famous *Living the Good Life* is entitled "A Balance Sheet of the Vermont Project." In it, Scott Nearing admitted that his ideas had not caught on among rural Vermonters, whose diets and relations with animals did not change at all. Furthermore, there was still "no positive force, in rural Vermont or in rural America, drawing communities together for well-defined social projects," because fundamentally Vermont's single households were "sovereign." Vermonters would never relinquish their precious individualism.

Scott Nearing's Vermont neighbors didn't change, so that's not how he changed Vermont. But there were ever-increasing hoards of people, especially city-bred young people, who were eager to change. They read about Helen and Scott Nearing's "experiment" in living a rural life, or they were otherwise exposed secondhand to the Nearings' ideas and idealism. In the mid-1960s and throughout the 1970s, many young Americans abhorred the Vietnam war even as Scott Nearing had abhorred the two World Wars. As they ventured to see for themselves what new life might be possible far from the ills of modern, capitalist, war-mad America, what is now called the "back-to-the-land movement" began. And backwoods Vermont, for good or ill, has never been the same.

The Danforth Library has ordered a copy of *The Good Life: Helen and Scott Nearing's Sixty Years of Self-Sufficient Living,* published in 1970 by Schocken Books, New York, as well as Scott Nearing's autobiography *The Making of a Radical*, published by Harper and Row in New York, 1972. The Danforth Library already owns Helen Nearing's Loving and Leaving the Good Life, 1992. Well worth reading is this article which can be found online: *Bushnell, Mark (September 29, 2019). "Then Again: Early back-to-the-landers inspired a generation, first in Vermont, then in Maine" VT Digger. Montpelier, VT.*

DANFORTH LIBRARY NEWS

The Community Legal Information Center (CLIC) is here to help Vermonters. They provide access to legal resources the opportunity to obtain one-on-one legal reference help from a law librarian.CLIC Offers help in person, via e-mail, telephone, and even video chat. Call the Ask A Law Librarian Line at 802-831-1313, and leave a message. A reference librarian will return your call when available. You can also send an email to: clic@vermontlaw.edu

Want to motivate yourself and/or your kids to keep reading this winter? Check out this winter reading challenge sponsored by the Vermont Department of Libraries! Open to all, just register at the link and download the app at: https://vermont.beanstack.org/

The Library is offering free access to hundreds of classes through Universal Class and Learning Express. Check out their offerings at: https://www.universalclass.com/ vermontstate or https://www.learningexpresshub.com. PLEASE NOTE: To register for free classes, you'll need a personal account that is connected to the Danforth Library. Before creating a personal account and to guarantee free class registration, please call us at 802-234-9408 or email us at charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com. We will give you a specific link to use for creating your personal account.

Have you heard about a new book you're dying to read? Let us know! We love suggestions from our patrons.

What else can you do at the library? You can:

- Enjoy a quiet place to work or read for a while
- Use our high-speed internet, inside or outside
- Have something notarized (second Monday of each month)
- Get some tech help or advice on resumes and cover letters (Thursdays)
- Book our meeting/all purpose room – at no charge!
- And of course, we have books, books, and more books! (Plus DVDs and books on tape)

COMMUNITY SPACE! Our clean, bright community room is available for your group or class. Start a reading group! A baby play group! Children's storytime! Movie club! There is on rental charge to book the Holway room. Call Ellen Miles at 802-279-7227 or email her at ellenmiles.vt@gmail.com

OUR HOURS: Look for the OPEN flag.
Mon, Weds, and Thurs 3-5 p.m. & Sat. 10 a.m. – Noon
Would you like to see the library open for more hours? We run on volunteer power, and we'd love to have your help. Call us to volunteer your time!

LOCAL CRYPTOGRAM

A cryptogram is a code in which one letter is substituted for another. For example, the word "Church" could be written BWMSBW. The letter B would be the letter C and would be so throughout the entire message. In this message F = I. The solution is found by trial and error. The CRYPTOGRAM answer is on the last page.

"F D K C L T A W T V R E C T C F P

C Q C T V R E F D J R N E N H C K N T W D O

D N R E F D J R N T C J T C R. U E F B C F R

F P K C L T A W T V N D C S W D R W P R C

R E C K A B B G N V P N K

W D R F S F H W R F N D. P H T F D J

P R W D O P W R R E C J W R C U F R E

E C T K F D J C T N D R E C B W R S E."

- H W R F C D S C P R T N D

THE PLANNING COMMISSION meets on the Monday prior to the first Wednesday of every month at 7 PM in the Town Office.

BARNARD CONSERVATION COMMISSION meets the second Monday of the month, 7:00pm, Town Hall.

BEES MEETINGS are held at 6:30pm on the 2nd Thursday of each month in the library at the school.

DANFORTH LIBRARY HOURS: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, 3:00 - 5:00 pm, Saturdays 10:00 am to Noon. ECFiber Wi-Fi. Contact us: phone: 802-234-9408. Email: charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com.

SELECTBOARD meets the first and third Wednesday of the month at the Town offices at 7:00pm.

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, selectboard@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

ZONING ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, zoning@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

TOWN CLERK office hours are Monday & Tuesday, 8:00am-3:30pm. Public access is restricted. Call 234-9211 for an appointment.

THE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW BOARD meets the third Thursday of the month at 7:00pm at the Barnard Town Hall as necessary.

THE BARNARD ENERGY COMMITTEE meets on the 2nd Tuesday of the month, 7:00pm at the Town Hall

BARNARD GENERAL STORE, Monday-Saturday: 7am-7pm, Sundays: 8am-6pm.
https://www.facebook.com/barnardgeneralstore

BARNARD LISTSERV: to subscribe please send an email to: barnard-subscribe@lists.vitalcommunities.org

RECYCLING Click here for Hours and Regulations

THE BARNARD INN is running a "Feeding Neighbors & Sustaining Community" campaign. Purchase an e-Gift Card and in turn the chefs will feed neighbors. Whole chicken dinners (serves 4-6) and individual sized meals to help feed Vermonters in need. Thank you and please stay safe. E-Gift Cards are available at www.barnardinn.com.

ECFIBER Governing Board meets the 2nd Tuesday of the month at 7pm via. Zoom. Contact the clerk of the District. secretary@ecfiber.net, for meeting information or visit https://www.ecfiber.net/virtual-meetings/

CRYPTOGRAM ANSWER

"In February there is everything to hope for and nothing to regret. While it is February one can taste the full joys of anticipation. Spring stands at the gate with her finger on the latch."

- Patience Strong

HISTORICAL SOCIETY Programs to be announced. Questions? Email: historicalbarnard1761@gmail.com

BARNARTS PRESENTS

Masquerade Jazz & Funk Winter Music Carnival
March 11, 2023, Barnard Town Hall

The Good Doctor by Neil Simon
March 17-26,2023 , Woodstock Town Hall Theatre

Pre-register now for the Race Around The Lake
Sunday, May 21 at BarnArts.org

AREA WINTER EVENTS

BILLINGS FARM & MUSEUM

SLEIGH RIDES AT BILLINGS FARM

Billings Farm & Museum offers sleigh rides on select dates in December, January, and February, starting Dec 18. Public sleigh rides are included with admission! Private sleigh rides can be reserved in advance online.

Visit https://billingsfarm.org/horse-drawn-rides/ for information.

VERMONT FISH & WILDLIFE FISHING FESTIVAL

Vermont Fish & Wildlife has announced this year's Fishing Festival will be held on Silver Lake on January 28th, 2023. See the Fishing Festival PDF for more information

REMINDERS

Second Property Tax Payment Due

February 15th, 2023

Barnard Town Meeting: March 7th, 2023

Selectman's Meeting Schedule Revisions

2/15/2023 moved to 2/22/2023 (Pre-Town Meeting)

3/15/2023 moved to 3/22/2023

Upcoming National Hollidays

Washingtons Birthday – February 20, 2023

PREKINDERGARTEN REGISTRATION

Windsor Central Supervisory Union's initial prekindergarten application window for the 2023-2024 school year is open through January 20, 2023. Residents of Barnard, Bridgewater, Killington, Plymouth, Pomfret, Pittsfield (for WCSU programs only), Reading, and Woodstock, with a child who will be three or four years old by September 1, 2023, can visit www.wcsu.net/prek for more information and to access the Step 1 application.

Applications are not considered on a first come-first served basis. All applications in the initial window are considered equally per our "Order of Enrollment" guidelines found on our website.