



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

April 2015

Westerly Historical Society Officers 2014-2015

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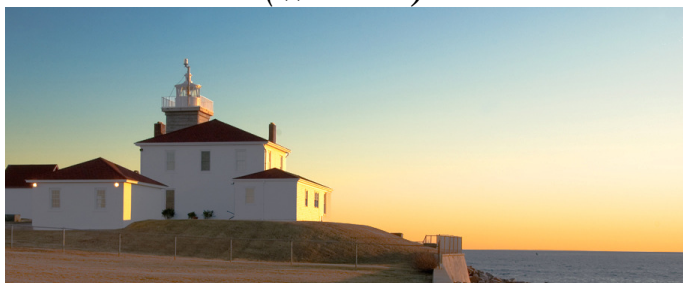
Calendar of Events

April 19, 2015

Ann Snowden Johnson

President

**Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association
(WHLKA)**



"The History of the Watch Hill Lighthouse"

Ann Snowden Johnson will present a descriptive history of the first Watch Hill lighthouse from 1808 to present and will discuss projects facing the association.

**At the Carriage House of the
Babcock-Smith House Museum, 124 Granite
Street, Westerly, RI.**

**Sunday at 2:00 P.M. ~~~This program is free and
open to the public.**

Calendar of Events-Continued

Westerly Historical Society Annual Meeting and Dinner Reception

Wednesday, May 13, 2015 5:30-8:00 PM

Venice Restaurant

\$25.00 per person

Join us for a relaxing evening with fellow members and friends! We will have a speaker, presentation of the Julia Award, and door prizes to add to your dining pleasure.

Menu

Cocktail Half-Hour 5:30-6:00 PM

Assorted Cheeses with Crackers

Cash Bar

Soft-drinks at No Charge

Dinner 6:00 PM

*Mixed Green Salad with
Balsamic Vinaigrette Dressing*

Choice of Chicken Piccata or Baked Scrod

Mixed Vegetables

Oven Roasted Potatoes

Fresh-baked Italian Bread and Butter

Chocolate Cake

Coffee, Tea

**Ticket orders must be received by
May 6, 2015.**

**There will be no tickets at the door.
See page 6 for ticket-ordering information.**

Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

When the popular Mermaid Café closed last year, proprietor Carolyn Burkhardt graciously donated to us her large, framed steamboat photographs that decorated the restaurant walls from the start. These old-time images were hung upon their arrival in the newly-renovated carriage house at the Babcock-Smith Museum.

Throughout the winter members and visitors spent time viewing them and raising questions. First let me state that each steamboat depicted in these photos ran along the Pawcatuck River at one time or another. Casual observers at the café may not have appreciated that the very river outside their breakfast table was home to these boats during nineteenth century.

What began as a simple donation and act of kindness has turned into a full-blown exhibit to be shown at the Babcock-Smith House Museum beginning in May of this year. At least five of the boats in these photos were owned in whole or in part by Orlando Raymond Smith. Several were named for the women in his family. In short, along with our partners at the museum house, we are all looking forward to showing off and speaking about these wonderful photographs when the museum opens for the season next month.

Speaking of the Babcock-Smith House Museum, please see the listing of museum events on page 5. Museum Chairman, John Coduri, has announced the date (May 23rd) for the open house and dedication of the carriage-house expansion. In addition, several interesting programs are scheduled over the coming months and the museum docents are working on a permanent exhibit about the local granite industry to be displayed in the carriage house.

The added space provided by the carriage house renovation has allowed the Westerly Historical Society to move all of its archives out of the Westerly Public Library and into our new secure vault in the lower level of the carriage house. The moving committee submitted the following announcement:

On Saturday, March 28, Westerly Historical Society president Ed Fazio, archivist Jan Tunney and secretary Maria Bernier were on hand as Watch Hill Moving & Storage packed up our collection in the basement of the Westerly Library and moved us to our new home at the Babcock-Smith House

Museum. Our archives are now located in a dedicated, climate-controlled vault in the museum's carriage house, with expanded space for research and collection management. Come visit our new space during the Museum's Open House on May 23!

Two other committees have been actively promoting our causes through our programs and publications. First, Pamela J. Scott, program director, welcomed Joseph Fusaro of the Westerly Fire Department last month. Joe's detailed presentation of the history of the Westerly Fire Department was expertly done and very well attended. (See our review of the event on page 3.) Pam has arranged for another interesting topic this Sunday on the history of the Watch Hill Lighthouse (see page 1 for details.)

Next, our publications committee is considering a reprint of a previously published book compiled by board member Dwight C. Brown, Jr. ***Leaves of My Journal – A. Whaler's Tale*** was a collection of columns that first appeared in the *Narragansett Weekly* in the mid-nineteenth century. The author, "A. Whaler" is obviously a pen-name, but through careful research, Dwight Brown has uncovered the name of the individual who probably wrote these stories. The vignettes contained in this collection offer a colorful insight into life on a whaling ship in the 1840s. From New Bedford to Cape Horn, this whaler's diary is very well written and quite entertaining.

As a means of piquing our readers' interest in the upcoming steamboat exhibit, we have decided to entertain you this month with some facts about Orlando R. Smith's river steamboats as depicted in *Pawcatuck River Steamboats* by Everett Barns. This little book published by the Westerly Historical Society in 1932 was a valuable resource for our work because the author, born in 1859, was a first-hand witness of these boats when they ran the river during his lifetime.

Lastly, don't forget to order your tickets for the Westerly Historical Society Annual Meeting and Dinner Reception. This is not an election year and there are no voting items on the agenda, but we are looking forward to a nice time at the *Venice*. Also, please watch our website for ticket-ordering information via credit card. The "shopping cart" and "order summary" functions are under construction at time of press but hopefully you can place your ticket orders online beginning the week of April 20. We hope to see you all there!

The Westerly Fire Department

170 Years of Service to the Community

By Ann L. Smith

Many folks don't realize that the Westerly Fire Department is a separate organization from the various fire-district companies within the town's borders. With roots going back to 1845 when they were known as the Westerly Fire Engine Company, the Westerly Fire Department is the oldest fire company in town.

Assistant Fire Chief Joseph Fusaro presented an informative talk and slide show last month tracing the Westerly Fire Department's history from its inception to the present day. The first firehouse appeared on Union Street in 1856, and the Westerly Fire Department obtained its current charter in 1870. Assistant Chief Fusaro demonstrated a meticulously detailed knowledge of each piece of equipment ever owned by the department. For fire-truck lovers, no detail of the inner workings of the early equipment was left out. For the less mechanically-minded, the old stories of firefighting "back in the day" were equally entertaining.

Consider the fact that the earliest fire trucks were pulled by men, not horses. This proved to be exhausting considering that the town's roads were often covered with snow or mud. It wasn't until the 1880s that horses were used to pull the wagons. Nearby Welsh's Stable would lease horses to the fire department and it is said that one favorite horse, Old Jake, would become restless in his stall each time the fire alarm rang.

The water used to extinguish Westerly's fires was provided by nine cisterns that were replenished by rainwater. Some of the worst fires of our history include the 1883 disaster at P.S. Barber's Soap Works on Mechanic Street, the Rhode Island Hotel (a.k.a. the Dixon House Hotel) fire of 1928 and the loss of our own fire station on Union Street in 1927. It was the soap works fire of 1883 that was the impetus for the formation of the Alert Hook and Ladder Company, which became part of the Westerly Fire Department.

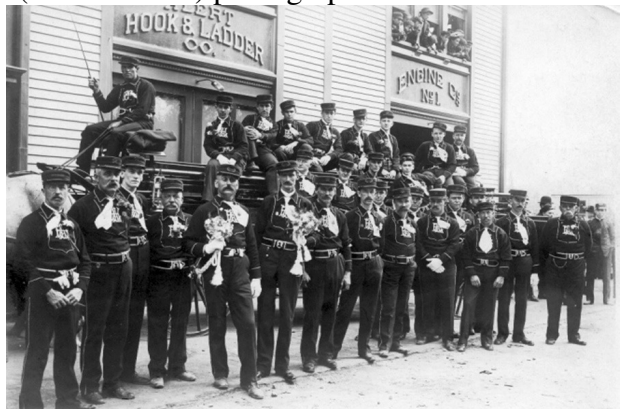
In 1914 the first motorized apparatus was purchased from the Maxim Company. The fire chief at the time was Samuel Cottrell. In 1921 the first motorized pumper was purchased from the Ahrens-Fox Company and it was assigned to the Cyclone Steam Engine Company #2. Around that time piston-type pumps were being replaced by centrifugal pump systems.

Even before the days of the soap works disaster, the Westerly Fire Department has maintained a close working relationship with the Pawcatuck Fire Department. Through the years the two towns have fought each others' fires just because of their geographical proximity. Pawcatuck may be in another state, but its first firehouse on Liberty Street in 1887 was as close to downtown Westerly as our own fire department is on Union Street.



FORMER UNION STREET FIREHOUSE – 1920s

The 1856 firehouse on Union Street was replaced in 1894 and rebuilt again in 1928 following the fire that destroyed it. The 1921 Ahrens-Fox was lost in the 1927 fire along with most of the other equipment and all of the department's records, except for a few old (and now rare) photographs.



UNDATED PHOTO - UNION STREET FIREMEN PRE-1927

Today the Westerly Fire Department responds to over 600 calls each year, is trained in the latest haz-mat and decontamination techniques, and maintains 408 alarm boxes that are controlled by a modern computer system. The department works closely with other fire companies in the area and is an active participant in community fire-prevention programs and local events.

Steamboats of the Pawcatuck River

by Ann L. Smith

No one knows for sure the name of the first steamboat to ever work the Pawcatuck River, but popular belief in 1932 was that the “Novelty” built by Sprague Barber in 1848 was the first steam-propelled craft to ever cruise the river. It was a crudely-built, double side-wheeler. Nearly abandoned, the “Novelty” was purchased sometime later by William D. Wells and his wife, Welcome Stillman. At the shipyard of Silas Greenman in Mystic, the boat was cut in two and lengthened. She was outfitted with a new copper boiler and re-christened the “Martha Jane” in honor of the Wells’ daughter. This began a long line of Pawcatuck River steamboats whose heyday lasted for roughly half a century.

Perhaps one of the more well-known steamboats of the time was the “Belle.” Commissioned by Messrs. Babcock and Moss (proprietors of the Dixon House Hotel) the “Belle” was built in Wilmington, Delaware and delivered here in 1868. Hotel guests were accommodated for free on her twice-daily runs to Watch Hill; forty cents for a round-trip was the rate for the general public.

While not all of the Pawcatuck River steamboats were built locally, most were. The most prolific local boat builders of the time were Silas Greenman and his sons, George, Clark, and Thomas. The Greenmans built boats of every kind at their operation in Mystic, but they also launched several boats from three locations along the Pawcatuck River.

Just south of Broad and Mechanic Streets in Pawcatuck is today the site of Donahue Park. The serene setting belies the bustle of an earlier time when the Wilcox Coal Company loaded tons of fuel onto scows and lighters from that exact location. Just down river from there was where one of the more well-known and older of the river steamboats, the “Julia,” was built and launched in 1882.

At that time Orlando R. Smith had already become involved in the riverboat business, having invested in a dredging operation. The “Julia” was commissioned (at least in part) by him and was named for his wife Julia Chapman Smith. Orlando Smith’s other steamboats included the “Sadie” (1884), the “Martha” (built at the Pendleton Dock in

Westerly at the intersection of Cross and Main Streets in 1891), the “Surf City” (1894), the “Mystic” (1896), and the “Hildegard” (1898). These last three were all constructed and launched at the site of the Hall and Dickinson lumberyard which was just further south of the Wilcox Coal Company than the original Greenman shipyard. George Greenman and Company built all of Orlando R. Smith’s steamboats and it seems as though George Greenman and Orlando R. Smith had a lifelong professional relationship. Historical records list George S. Greenman as one of the directors of the Smith Granite Company.

Greenman and Smith had also previously incorporated the “Westerly and Watch Hill Steam Ferry Company” in 1888. George S. Greenman was president and Orlando R. Smith was the treasurer. Charles B. Coon, another prominent businessman of the time was also a financier and director of the company.

When the Pawcatuck Valley Street Railroad began operating in 1894, many beach-goers and tradesmen opted to ride the train to Watch Hill instead of the ferries. Undaunted, Orlando R. Smith went ahead with the construction of the “Mystic” and “Hildegard” because he loved steamboats. In the words of Everett Barnes, “He realized that there were still many people that would enjoy the little cruises and excursions down and out of the river and to such places as Norwich, New London, Saybrook, Essex, Greenport, Sag Harbor, and the like.”

Orlando R. Smith died in 1898, the same year that the “Hildegard” was launched. The “Hildy” was double-decked from stem to stern and was fully equipped electrically, including a searchlight. She was said to have been the most beautiful, the best appointed and speediest of all the Pawcatuck River steamboats. She was also the last to be built along the Pawcatuck River.

The golden age of the Pawcatuck River steamboats seems to have died with Orlando R. Smith. Folks still chartered steamboats for special occasions and moonlight cruises, but their great popularity had ended. Traveling by rail was the common way to travel as the new century had dawned.

***Dedication for the
Babcock-Smith House Museum
Carriage House Expansion
Saturday, May 23rd***

The Dedication Program for the Carriage House addition at the Babcock-Smith House Museum will be held on Saturday, May 23rd at 1:00 P.M. Invited guests will include members of both the Babcock-Smith House Museum and the Westerly Historical Society, donors to the capital campaign, and the various trades involved with the addition construction. The special dedication program will be followed by the annual Open House hosted by the museum docents.



The addition includes a Westerly granite industry exhibit, a new “home” for the Westerly Historical Society and their archives as well as larger space for docent programs such as the annual Fifth Grade tours for Westerly students.

***Other Events
at the
Babcock-Smith House Museum***

***Tools and Machinery That Created
the Granite Industry***

Saturday, April 18, 2015 1:00 P.M.

The Babcock-Smith House Museum is thrilled to host and partner with the Early American Industries Association (EAIA) at their regional meeting on Saturday April 18. Paul Wood, noted expert on tools, will present the main address on "Tools and Machinery That Created the Granite Industry" in the Carriage House at 1:00 P.M. The public is invited to attend. Members are free. Non-members: \$2.00.



***Two Years in China*
Sunday June 14, 2015, 2:00 P.M.**

Elizabeth Fitzroy joined the Peace Corps when she was 57 and spent two years living in a town in Ganzu Province where she taught English in a local college. She will share her experiences living in China and interacting with the Chinese.



At the Carriage House.
Non-members \$2.00; members free.

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED
The Westerly Historical Society
P.O. Box 91
Westerly, RI 02891



Westerly Historical Society Annual Meeting and Dinner Ticket Order Form

Please send me ____ tickets for the
Westerly Historical Society Annual Meeting
and Reception on May 13, 2015 @ \$25.00
each.

Enclosed please find my check for \$_____

Name(s)_____

Address_____

City_____

State and Postal Code_____

Please indicate your entrée preference(s):

Chicken Piccata _____

Baked Scrod _____

Send this form with your check or money
order before May 6th to:

Westerly Historical Society
PO Box 91
Westerly, RI 02891

**Internet orders may be placed on our
website after April 20, 2015 at**
<http://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/>

Click on the words “Annual Meeting.”