



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

November-December 2015

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Calendar of Events-Continued

Feb 21, 2016 2:00 P.M.

“The United Theatre Project: History, Renovation, and Future”

Tony Nunes and Simon Holt will present

The history of this once vibrant hub of entertainment located in the heart of our own downtown. Purchased by the Westerly Land

Trust in 2006, plans are underway for the complete renovation and restoration of United Theatre. Please join us for this informative talk!



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**Programs are held in the
carriage house of the
Babcock-Smith House Museum
124 Granite Street
Westerly, RI**

Free Admission

to Westerly Historical Society Members and
Members of the Babcock-Smith House Museum

Admission for Non-Members: \$5.00

Memberships Available at:

<http://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/membership/>

January 24, 2016 - 2:00 P.M.

Members Only event!

A Potluck Dinner and Research Sharing Afternoon

You are cordially invited to our winter potluck dinner. The price of admission is just to bring along a potluck dish of any kind to share. We will

happily eat whatever shows up rather than planning a balanced meal. Please bring your choice of appetizers, entrees, sides, or desserts. Beverages (coffee, tea, water, cider) and bread /rolls will be provided. Interested parties are invited to speak (5-10 minutes) on their current historical research or projects. Please contact Pamela Scott, Program Director, with your topic.

Email: whsprograms@gmail.com or phone

(401)-741-8705).

Looking forward to a wonderful afternoon!

See you then!

Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

October came and went in a blur, it seems and already the holiday season is upon us. We enjoyed our afternoon with "Steamboats of the Pawcatuck River" and our audience members had the chance to get one last look at the steamboat prints hanging in the Babcock-Smith House museum before the regular museum tours ended for the season. A video of the steamboat talk will be available soon through both the Westerly Historical Society's website and that of the Babcock-Smith Museum.

Speaking of the museum house, it is almost time for the annual Babcock-Smith House Holiday Weekend. (Details can be found on page seven.) A few Westerly Historical Society members will be on hand on the weekend of December 4, 5, and 6 to offer information about the benefits of joining the WHS and to take in all the sights and sounds (and flavors!) of this annual holiday event. Highlights include the "Celebration of Trees" and a concert.

On January 24th, we are hosting a "members-only" pot-luck dinner at 2:00 P. M. We are preparing to showcase our current projects by having board members and invited guests give a brief summary of their latest research or project. If you've ever wondered what it takes to prepare a printed work for publication, or how we select our speakers, this is your chance to find out! We hope you will join us for a relaxed afternoon of pot-luck dinner and socializing with your fellow historical society members.

In this special "double" issue of *Westerly's Witness*, we present a well-researched and well-written article on "Westerly's Forgotten Golf Courses and Parks" (see pages 3-6) contributed by board member Thomas E. Wright. This story grew out of an inquiry we received in the spring of this year and is the culmination of hours of fact-finding about these old places of recreation. Tom Wright took on the project as an interested golfer and historian. The finished product contains a plethora of little-known facts about Westerly and we are grateful for Tom Wright's contribution.

More thanks are in order for our newest guardian angel, Michael (Shane) Devine of Stonington, who through his technical wizardry, salvaged the electronic copy of *Westerly's Gold-Her People*

from an outmoded zip drive on hand since 2003. This important work by our former newsletter editor, Thomas A. O'Connell, is currently out of print and is expected to go into its second printing by the spring of next year. Shane Devine graciously volunteered to decode the previously unreadable files because of his love for all things historical. He currently works with the Stonington Historical Cemetery Restoration Project and is a technology specialist by trade. Our newly converted electronic copy of *Westerly's Gold* will be safely stored in our archive vault for future use.

With the coming year we turn our attention to the Westerly Historical Society budget. We have received many membership renewals over the last six weeks and we wish to express our deepest thanks to all those who have renewed so far. We are grateful especially to all those who have joined at the patron, benefactor, or sustaining level. Your loyalty, thoughtfulness, and generosity promote our worthy endeavors and we could not continue our important works without your support. If you have not yet renewed your membership, please visit <http://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/membership/> and scroll down to renew online or mail your check to:

Westerly Historical Society
P.O. Box 91
Westerly, RI 02891

We are now offering Westerly Historical Society gift memberships as an added incentive to joining. For every two memberships purchased, a third will be provided to you at no charge. The complimentary membership may be applied to a member's own dues but cannot be used as payment for the dues of a previously enrolled member. Simply let us know under "Add special instructions to the seller" when ordering online that you are purchasing gifts or enclose a note with your check if mailing to the above address. A commemorative card acknowledging your donation will be sent to the person(s) receiving gift membership.

Our next issue of *Westerly's Witness* is scheduled for late January and will be another expanded issue. In the meantime we hope you will join us at the Babcock-Smith House Museum for the "Holiday Weekend" event and again in January as we chase away the winter cold with a warm and cozy pot-luck meal. We hope to see you there!

WESTERLY'S FORGOTTEN GOLF COURSES AND PARKS

By Thomas E. Wright

Articles in this newsletter are often inspired by individuals contacting the Westerly Historical Society (WHS) inquiring about one subject or another. In this case we were contacted by Father Gerald Beirne, who resides in Narragansett and was doing research on his own regarding extinct golf courses in Rhode Island. Two courses he was investigating in our area were the Weekapaug Golf Club and the Riverside Golf Club. Both of these were described in *Harper's Golf Digest* in the early 1900s.

For those golfers, including myself, the three golf courses in Westerly that we are familiar with today are the Misquamicut Golf Club (1895), the Winnapaug Golf Club (1922), and the Weekapaug Golf Club (1898). The Weekapaug Golf Club today is a modernized version of the course described in *Harper's Golf Digest* as being located on Noyes Beach. Here is a description from that magazine of the Weekapaug Golf Club as it existed in 1900.

WEEKAPAUG GOLF CLUB—Situated six miles from the Westerly station of the N.Y., N.H., and H. Railroad at Weekapaug, Rhode Island. Organized 1898. The nine-hole course is very prettily situated, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, and considering how little money has been expended, it is in fair condition. The names and distances of the holes are: 1. Knole, 150; 2. Bob White, 196; 3. Hazard, 263; 4. Ocean View, 220; 5. Edward Bellamy, 308; 6. Cross Cut, 248; 7. Water Side, 175; 8. Homeward Bound, 158; 9. Giant, 406. The president of the club was Rev. S. H. Davis and the captain was Julian Maxson whom we will read about later in this article. Annual dues for men were \$1, and fifty cents for women. Membership \$83.

The course was constructed on property owned by Lucy Carpenter and was most likely located on approximately the same footprint of the present day Weekapaug club. The two photographs here depict golfers on the Misquamicut Golf Club circa 1911. Note the size of the golf ball that the stylish woman is putting on the first hole. It is approximately the size of a baseball!

Locating the second extinct course was quite a

challenge but well worth the effort, not so much in respect to the golf course itself, but that it revealed the site of a former social center in Westerly where many activities were held. Here again is how the course is described in *Harper's Digest*:

RIVERSIDE GOLF CLUB---At Westerly, R.I. on the N.Y., N.H. & H. Railroad, one mile from the depot, and accessible the greater part of the year by electric cars. Organized April 6th, 1899. Membership \$50. Visitors pay 25 cents per day. The following are the names and distances, for the nine holes: 1. Road Side, 175; 2. Valley, 200; 3. Tip Tap, 162; 4. Orchard, 150; 5. Spring, 177; 6. Beauty, 450; 7. Meadow, 200; 8. Pond, 175; 9. Knoll, 242. The amateur record is 38, by J.H. McKinley. The nine hole course was laid out by S.H. Davis in April 1899, and considering the short time since the club was founded it is in fairly good condition, the sod on the greens being very compact.



MISQUAMICUT GOLF CLUB
PHOTO COURTESY WESTERLY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES

But where exactly was Riverside Golf Club? The 1901 description mentions that it is one mile away from the railroad station and accessible by electric car. This meant that it had to be on a trolley line and likely adjacent to the Pawcatuck River. A look at the
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WESTERLY'S FORGOTTEN GOLF COURSES AND PARKS

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1905 map of Westerly identifies a Riverside Park on the corner of Canal Street and Pleasant Street. This plot of land is now occupied by National Grid and was the site of sporting events and fairs during that time period. Did a trolley line head out that way? The trolley line did head south along Beach Street but the area about one mile away from the train station (which was also relocated in 1912) seems very developed and was bordered by Riverbend Cemetery and St. Sebastian Cemetery.



MISQUAMICUT GOLF CLUB
PHOTO COURTESY WESTERLY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES

The first clue to its true location came from a collection of newspaper clippings cataloged in 1938 by George H. Utter who was then editor of the *Westerly Sun*. Mr. Utter at the time was writing "Did you know" snippets about events occurring thirty years ago in Westerly in 1908. In several of his articles he refers to Riverside Golf Club. It was located on Foster Farm. The name "Foster Farm" still exists today and if you drive along Beach Street heading south past the site of the Westerly Nursing Home you will see a sign for Foster Farm Condominiums located on 85 Beach Street. The house at that site was the home of Ethan Foster who purchased the farm in 1864. The area of the farm roughly occupied all the land south of Beach Street down to the Pawcatuck River and between the two cemeteries earlier referred to.

The Riverside Golf Club was formed on April 9th, 1899. A group of men met at the Westerly Library and voted to organize the club. Plans were discussed

for the improvements of the present links on the Foster Farm. This meant that golfing at the site was already going on. Whether this club or the Misquamicut Club is the first golf club in Westerly is unknown. Mr. Utter mentions that the clubhouse was directly across the street from the main house and just south of the apple orchard (between Crestview Drive and Juniper Drive). The former clubhouse was still in existence in 1938 and rented out as a summer cottage. Holes were positioned on both sides of Beach Street and on one hole the golfer's drove the ball directly across the road. I hope a trolley was not going by at the time! Duck! It remains unknown how long the club existed beyond 1908.



FOSTER FARM HOUSE AS IT APPEARS TODAY

Before Wilcox Park

Where exactly did people go for outdoor entertainment in the late 1800s? Wilcox Park was not a public park at the time so other places around town were selected. Since the automobile was not around, sites had to be near the railroad station or trolley lines. Doing research on the golf course sites unveiled a great deal of information regarding the two sites mentioned above, Riverside Park and Foster Farm.

Riverside Park, located at the corner of Canal and Pleasant Streets was very active starting in 1895. The Westerly Baseball Company owned the property then and after 71 names were submitted chose to select Riverside Park as an appropriate name since it was so close to the river (Moore's Mill is located directly across the park on Canal Street.) The *Westerly Sun*

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describes in great detail some of the activities going on there in the mid 1890s. On August 27th, 1897 two events occurred on the same day. In the morning the Caledonian Festival was held featuring Scottish music and heavy events such as the shot-put. A parade down to Riverside Park took place starting from the meeting place of the Caledonian Society (above the former *Westerly Sun* building). Bagpiper J. Riddell fired up his pipes (described as sounding like a "pig in distress" by the *Sun* reporter) but then settled down to play well for the Highland Dancers. I can relate to this myself being a bagpiper and my grandfather, Tom Wright, teaching highland dancing in Westerly in the 1920s. It was an extremely hot day and the grandstand (built for watching baseball) provided little shade and blocked a cooling wind. The festival ended at about 1:30 in the afternoon and made way for the next event.

Bicycling as a Major Sport

Who would think this would be such a big deal but it certainly was. The field was cleared of the estimated 300 to 400 spectators from the Scottish Festival to make room for the bicycle race. Westerly had its own team at the time and they were known as the "Lobsters." They competed against teams from New London, Providence, Boston and elsewhere. Competitors would take the train from Massachusetts and Connecticut to Westerly to compete. Some, no doubt, stayed at the Dixon House. Competitors raced for prizes which were, in some cases, diamonds valued at between 30 and 50 dollars; a valuable prize in the late 1800s. The course was laid out circling the baseball field, made of concrete, and bordered by gravel. Teams would race based on handicaps as golfers do today. The best bicyclists would start further back to give the weaker ones an equal chance to win. A judge from Providence adjudicated the race. Racers were frequently described as having cuts and bruises but no broken bones. Riverside Park was sold at a mortgagee sale on January 31, 1901.

Foster Farm as a Social Center

As mentioned earlier in this article Riverside Golf Club was built on Foster Farm. However, social events other than golf took place there. On August 18th and 19th, 1908, an outdoor play was held at the farm. The play was sponsored by the Westerly

Exchange for Women's Work. The name of the play was "The Old Vermont Farm." The event drew an estimated 1,000 people from Westerly and its surrounding towns. The trolley left every fifteen minutes from the Westerly train station to take people to Foster Farm. Many people walked and some took cars from Watch Hill. The audience sat on the slope of the hill which led down to Blackbird's Pond (I can remember skating there in the late 1950s.) An orchestra provided music as well as thirty choral members. One of the actors in the play was Julian Wells Maxson. Julian was captain of both the Weekapaug Golf Club and the Riverside Golf Club. Mr. Maxson is remembered today as the co-founder (along with his father, Charles B. Maxson) of the Maxson Automatic Machinery Company, formerly on Granite Street and now on Airport Road. Here is a photo of him in 1908 as he appeared in "The Old Vermont Farm" as "Weary Bill."



JULIAN W. MAXSON,
as "Weary Bill", a hobo.

Why Did They Close?

It remains somewhat of a mystery why the Riverside Park and the Foster Farm as a social centers and golf courses did not continue later on in the 20th century. Part of the explanation might be the increased use of Wilcox Park for major events.

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WESTERLY'S FORGOTTEN GOLF COURSES AND PARKS

(continued from page 5)

It was closer to town and a trolley was not needed. Baseball was very big in the 1890s and early 1900s so more and more fields came into use. The large increase in the numbers of automobiles also took a toll on bicycles as a form of transportation and caused the need for trolleys to diminish.

Going Back in Time

The next time you travel down Canal Street try to picture the bicycle race going on at Riverside Park. People are cheering their favorite racers to the finish. A couple of Scotsmen are ambling back to the Caledonian Hall for a pint or two. Continue up Main Street to Beach Street and pull your car over near Crestview Drive. Close your eyes and listen closely. Do you hear it now? The trolley is cresting the hill, Julian Maxson has just teed off. WATCH OUT!!!! FORE!!!!!!

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Acknowledgements for their contributions are gratefully given to WHS board members Tom O'Connell, Jan Tunney, and Ann Smith. Thanks also to Father Beirne for the inspiration to write this piece. – Thomas E. Wright

Vaudeville Comes to Westerly

January 18, 1926 – “Five Big Acts of Paramount Vaudeville” reads the sign in front of the United Theater at 5 Canal Street in downtown Westerly. Most of us would think twice about leaving home on a Monday night in the middle of winter to see a show, but that is just what the citizens of Westerly did when the United Theatre opened for business in 1926. The headliners were the Seven Rainbow Girls, Eddie Cooke and the Shaw Sisters, Bernard and Ferris, Exposition Jubilee, and the Jean Jackson Troupe. That night also featured the first film ever to play at the United: the now lost May McAvoy silent film *Tessie*.

An issue of the *Vaudeville News* from February 19, 1927 described Eddie Cook as the former musical director for Eva Tanguay (a *Zeigfeld Follies* favorite). He was planning a new act for “Cook and the Shaw Sisters” by 1927. The Shaw girls, it was noted, received their training in Zeigfeld’s “Midnight

Vaudeville Comes to Westerly

(continued from previous column)

Follies.” A quick browsing through other newspapers of the late 1920s shows that Eddie Cook and the Shaw sisters appeared in many U. S. cities including Pittsburgh, Oshkosh, and New York.

In the *Scranton Republican* the Seven Rainbow Girls were written up as the “prettiest, most capable dancers seen this present season. The seven young women are not only exceptional dancers but they sing as well, making their program a most diversified one.” Elsewhere in the same paper it describes Bernard and Ferris as two men, “but one of them comes on in a woman’s costume and sings in a woman’s voice. Practically everyone in the audience is enraptured with the splendid, powerful voice of the woman.” Somewhere amidst the applause, the woman’s costume is cast aside and the audience is amazed to find that they were serenaded by the most talented of female impersonators.

The Exposition Jubilee was a group of four black singers who sang in harmony in the style of the period. *Wikipedia* explains jubilee quartets as follows.

Jubilee quartets were popular African-American religious musical groups in the first half of the 20th century. The name derives from the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a group of male singers organized by students at Fisk University in 1871 to sing Negro spirituals, which had typically been sung by mixed choirs before then. Students at other historically black schools, such as Hampton Institute, Tuskegee Institute and Wilberforce University, followed suit.

Lastly, the Jean Jackson Troupe was a novelty act of five women cyclists. Their ad on the entertainment pages grabbed readers attention with the words, “Speed! Dash! Class! – A Gay Whirl of Pretty Girls.”

Patrons enjoyed all this and a movie too for the price of a 35-cent ticket. Such was the entertainment fare in our town nearly ninety years ago. We hope you will join us for more of Westerly’s entertainment history when we greet our speakers Tony Nunes and Simon Holt this February for their presentation on the history of the United Theatre.

The Babcock-Smith House Museum Proudly Presents

Holiday Weekend *December 4, 5 and 6, 2015*



Friday, December 4, 2015 7:00 to 9:00 P.M.

Celebration of Trees*

Joshua's Store and Bazaar

Enjoy our courtyard with its holiday lighting

Saturday, December 5, 2015 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M.

Bazaar: baked goods and cookies, muffins and coffee, crafty kitchen items, gently-used Christmas items, basket raffle, holiday greens, PBS video and book *Carved From Stone*, and Joshua's Store.

Celebration of Trees*

Sunday, December 6, 2015 2:00 P.M.

Holiday Concert featuring ...

Community Church Ringers Quartet and Tenor Michael Grillo

Refreshments following the concert

Celebration of Trees* from 2:45 to 5:00 P.M.

Joshua's Store



* Celebration of Trees: admission \$10, \$5 for members and free for children under 12. Sunday afternoon includes both the concert and the Celebration of Trees.

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



There's Still Time to Go Paperless

In an effort to contain costs, the Westerly Historical Society offers the option to go paperless to our subscribers of the *Westerly's Witness* newsletter.

The *Westerly's Witness* newsletter current issues can be accessed at www.WesterlyHistoricalSociety.org with your members-only password.

If you would like to discontinue paper mailings and receive an email and password to alert you each time a new issue of *Westerly's Witness* is available online, simply respond to whssecretary@gmail.com, and we will add your email address to our e-newsletter mailing list.

If you would like to keep receiving your hard copy of the newsletter **in addition** to the e-newsletter, please let us know that when you sign up for the e-newsletter and you will continue to receive a paper copy as you always have.

From All of Us

As we move ever closer to the holiday season, we hope you will take time to reflect on the past, give thanks, and celebrate all that is good in your lives.



Whatever your holiday and no matter your faith, we wish you our sincerest and warmest blessings now and for the coming new year.

*The Westerly Historical Society
Executive Board*