



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

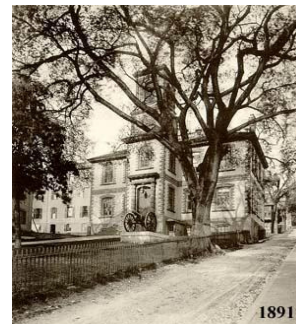
March 2017

Westerly Historical Society Officers 2016-2017

President Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.	Membership Chair Joanne Pendola
Vice President Vacant	Newsletter Ann L. Smith
Secretary Maria L. Bernier	Programs Pamela J. Scott
Treasurer Ann L. Smith	Web Master Maria L. Bernier
Archivist Janice B. Tunney	Members At Large Dwight C. Brown, Jr. John Leach Brenda Linton Thomas A. O'Connell Thomas E. Wright
Babcock-Smith House Museum Liaison Edward A. Fazio	

Calendar of Events

Historic Preservation in Westerly April 2, 2017 2:00 P.M.



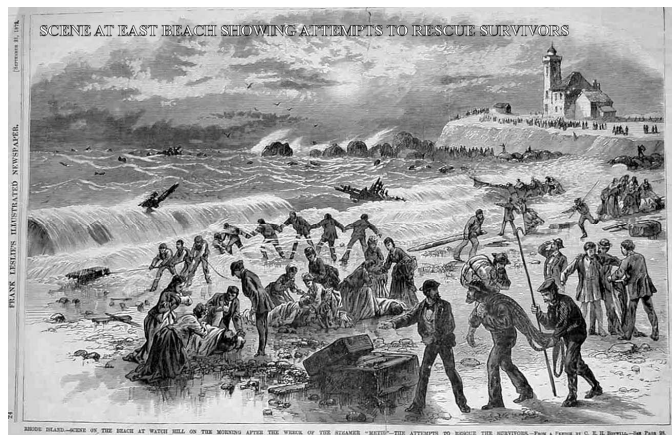
Jane Elizabeth D. Warburton, Senior Architectural Historian, Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission (SHPO) will speak on the National Register of Historic Places and historic preservation in Westerly. Visit <http://www.preservation.ri.gov/>

In this Issue

Editor's Notes.....Page 2

Program Review:
The Tomaquag Museum..... Page 3

Feature Article:
The Wreck of the *Metis*..... Page 4
by Dwight C. Brown, Jr.



SAVE THE DATE!

Westerly Historical Society Annual Meeting and Dinner

Wednesday, May 17, 2017

Cocktails 5:30 PM

Dinner 6:00 PM

Annual Recap of Activities

Financial Report

Guest Speaker

See page 6

For Ticket Order Form

Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

By now most of us have heard of the passing of our beloved friend, Gloria Russell. She left this world on January 28th at the age of 90. There is not much more that anyone can say at this point that has not already been said. If we could even begin to list



GLORIA RUSSELL 1926-2017

all the accomplishments of this great Westerly icon, there would be room for little else to print.

Perhaps her most important journalistic milestone was when Gloria made history in 1966 by becoming the first female reporter for the

Westerly Sun. In retirement her talents turned to recapturing local history through her weekly newspaper column, "Reminiscing." Gloria's wry earthy outlook on events of days gone by was unique in that it reflected an unapologetic assessment of the way life was in the "good old days."

The Sunday feature "Reminiscing" poked fun at politics past and present, as well as fashion, music, movies and everything else that affects or affected our daily lives. Gloria's long tenure on this Earth afforded her a seemingly bottomless repository of little-known facts. These combined with her matchless wit made getting the Sunday *Sun* something to look forward to.

Gloria's columns appeared in print almost to the day she died. Many previous columns have already been collected into two books, *Reminiscing* and *Reminiscing II*. We here at the Westerly Historical Society were pleased and delighted to host Gloria at our evening book signing in 2015 and conferred the Society's Julia Award on her last year for her outstanding lifelong contributions to our local history.

In her private life, Gloria Russell was as much a gem to those who knew her as she was when in the public eye. Beneath the sometimes tough exterior lay a compassionate, caring soul. She donated her time and talents to many but was never known to flaunt it. Hers was a quiet kindness when helping others and she was devoted to her family as well.

Gloria lost her dear husband Harold and her

beloved son Eric within a few short months of each other just last year. Time could not heal these deepest of wounds, and so our special friend has been taken from our midst. Gloria's reminiscing has now come to an end, but our reminiscing of her has only just begun.



In this month's issue we bring you the program review of Lorén Spears's wonderful presentation of the Tomaquag Museum and the Native people it represents. The talk was so rich in information and detail that the questions and answer period lasted much longer than any of us had anticipated. This in itself was not a bad thing: it just showed us how much we have yet to learn about our closest neighbors, the Narragansetts. The article begins on Page 3.

As a follow-up to his presentation at our January pot-luck dinner and research sharing event, Dwight C. Brown, Jr. has generously contributed his narrative of the wreck of the steamer, *Metis*. This singular event comes up again and again in the discussion of our area's nineteenth century events. Whether we are discussing the history of the Rhode Island lifesaving stations, historic shipwrecks, or the steamboats of the Pawcatuck River, the *Metis* was arguably the biggest local story of the 1870s. Most of the passengers and crew perished; the Larkin House patrons of Watch Hill spent the day watching the waves as rescuers returned and wrecked decking washed up upon the shore. The river steamboats altered their schedules to accommodate the throngs of onlookers arriving from the Dixon House and elsewhere uptown.

It should be noted that Dwight Brown is considered to be one of the foremost experts on Westerly's maritime history, having amassed untold volumes (and terrabytes!) of data and images on the subject. We wish to thank Ted Dionne who assisted with the research and compilation of data for this feature article. For additional content on the wreck of the *Metis*, please visit the following link to our website:

<https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/newsletters/>

"The Wreck of the *Metis*" begins on Page 4.

Program Review: The Tomaquag Museum

By Ann L. Smith

When people picture members of other cultures in their mind's eye, they may or may not see someone who resembles themselves. If the word "German" is mentioned, does the image of Andrea Merkel come to mind or would we think of a costumed individual sporting lederhosen and carrying a glockenspiel? How about "Japanese?" As much as we might like kimonos, our modern attitudes more likely would have us visualize a brainy scientist type, working on the next new small car import, for example. Imagine, then, what challenges Rhode Island indigenous people face when, upon greeting visitors at the Tomaquag Museum, they hear them demand to see "real Indians."

While traditional costumes, regalia, and ceremonial dress make up a big part of Native culture, it is a mistake to expect that indigenous people would not assimilate the styles, food, and other aspects of the world taking place around them. The fact is, there are many misconceptions surrounding Native culture in the United States and the Narragansett people in particular. As a means to educate and welcome non-indigenous people to the Narragansett culture, the Tomaquag Museum was born.

Tomaquag Museum was first founded as the Tomaquag Indian Memorial Museum by archaeologist Eva Butler and Narragansett/Pokanoket Wampanoag historian and educator Mary E. Glasko, also known as Princess Red Wing of the Seven Crescents, first opening in 1958 in Tomaquag Valley, a hamlet in Ashaway Rhode Island. After the passing of Eva Butler in 1969, Tomaquag Museum relocated to Exeter RI, adjacent to the renowned Dovecrest Restaurant. Partnering with the restaurant on events and thanksgiving celebrations in the 70s and 80s, Princess Red Wing continued to assist the operations of the museum in addition to advocating for indigenous people of New England. During this time, the Museum undertook its first big projects for the development and management of collections and archives in an effort to better organize the museum and expand exhibits.

Lorén Spears became the Executive Director in 2003 and continued growing the organization, even establishing a school onsite for Native American children, known as the Nuweetooun School which unfortunately had to close in 2010 due to severe flooding damage. A generous grant from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts (RISCA) supported

new exhibits, and funding from the Champlin Foundation furnished archival equipment in 2005. Between 2003 and 2010, Paulla Dove Jennings, curator, and Kate April, archivist, worked gratis writing grants, consolidating collections, and curating exhibits. Their efforts served as the backbone of Tomaquag's growth and development.

The issues facing the Narragansett community today are many. Aside from bridging the cultural gap, indigenous empowerment lies at the top of the list of priorities for the Tomaquag Museum. Empowerment for the Narragansetts encompasses several goals, but the most important among these involve social justice, lessening poverty, and improving civil rights. Lorén Spears described a new initiative to form partnerships with the broader community at large to provide jobs. The Native artisans at Tomaquag have much to offer the world in the way of education, entertainment, publications and historical reproduction of artifacts. The Tomaquag Museum has already partnered with the Boston Children's Museum, Roger Williams University and the Roger Williams National Memorial as part of their mission to fulfill these goals.

In 2016, Tomaquag was awarded the National Medal for Museum and Library Service, the nation's highest honor given to museums and libraries for service in the community.



MICHELLE OBAMA WITH LORÉN SPEARS

For 22 years, the award has celebrated institutions that respond to societal needs in innovative ways, making a difference for individuals, families, and their communities. Tomaquag is honored to have received this exceptional distinction and looks forward to continuing the important work of elevating indigenous voices and stories.

The Tomaquag Museum is located at 390 A Summit Road in Exeter, RI. For further information and directions, please visit their website at <https://www.tomaquagmuseum.org/home>

The Wreck of the Metis

By Dwight C. Brown Jr.

The steamship *Metis* left New York City at 5:15 P.M. on August 29, 1872 for an overnight trip to Providence, RI. She had been hastily loaded with a cargo of cotton bales, covering access to some of the holds. This later would present unforeseen consequences for the safety of the vessel and her passengers. Other cargo consisted of a large consignment of cop yarn stored in the holds and on the hurricane deck. The cargo was destined for the fabric mills of Providence and Fall River. The number of persons aboard included 110 passengers and 45 crewmembers, who under the command of Captain Charles L. Burton, anticipated a 12 to 15 hour trip up Long Island Sound to Providence, RI.

She departed from New York under overcast skies and with a brisk breeze blowing across her bow. The inclement weather caused many of the passengers to retire early. By morning the breeze had developed into rain squalls and strong gales.

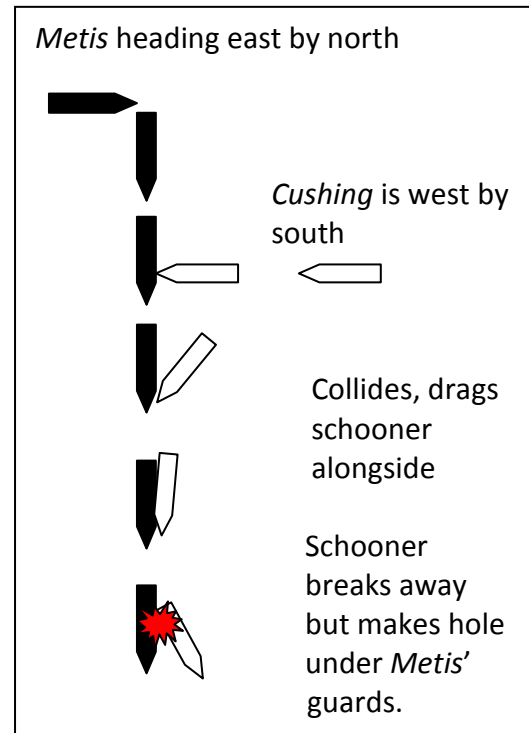
The *Metis* had been built in 1864 at New York City for freighting cargo for the Union Civil War effort. She was propeller-driven and, at 200 feet long, was later converted into a freighter/passenger steamer by the addition of a so-called "hurricane" deck. This was done in 1871 to accommodate the growing demand for passenger service.

Up the coast to the north, the other key player in this historical episode, the *Nettie Cushing*, had set sail for from Thomaston, Maine on August 27, 1872. This cargo schooner, under the command of Captain Emory Jameson, was headed for New York with a cargo of lime and lumber.

By the evening of August 29, the *Nettie Cushing* was off the coast of Rhode Island proceeding west by south. By the early morning hours of August 30, she was heading for a sighting of the Watch Hill Light on her starboard side. Just after 3:00 A.M. she was in the Watch Hill Race. She had sighted the Watch Hill Light and was looking for Little Gull Island Light as her next reference, heading west by south.

At 3:40 A.M. the *Nettie Cushing* sighted the *Metis'* green and white running lights to her starboard. From here the multiple stories conflict, but what follows is this author's personal understanding of the collision. The *Metis* ported her wheel, turning the vessel to the starboard and thereby putting her directly and squarely across the bow of the *Nettie Cushing*. The *Nettie Cushing* could not change

course or the setting of her sails in time to avoid a collision. The *Nettie Cushing* struck the *Metis* almost opposite the pilot house, putting a hole in the side of the *Metis* under her guards; at the same time the *Cushing* lost some of her head gear. The collision



DEPICTION OF COLLISION
BETWEEN *NETTIE CUSHING* AND *METIS*

caused the *Nettie Cushing* to be dragged alongside of the *Metis* for a short time. The setting of rigging on the *Cushing* enabled her to break away and the decision was made to head for New London, the nearest repair port. In the interval the *Metis'* captain ordered the engine stopped and assigned two of the off-duty mates to investigate the damage. At that moment the steamer *Nereus* came alongside the *Metis* and asked if any assistance was required. The captain of the *Metis*, not knowing that his vessel was being flooded indicated that no assistance was needed.

The duty mates reported back to the captain that no visible damage could be verified as access to the hold was blocked by cotton bales. The two mates had leaned over the ship's sides with a lantern to examine the port side of the steamer, and from this vantage point no visible damage was observed. They also noted, however, that visibility was very limited.

(continued on next page)

The Wreck of the Metis

(continued from page 4)

What they were not aware of was that the vessel was already compromised, as water was pouring into the hold. The so-called watertight bulkheads had been defeated by holes that had been previously cut into them and so they collapsed. Multiple “watertight” holds rapidly flooded.

It soon became obvious to the crew and captain, however, that something was terribly wrong when the engine room notified them that their engines were in danger of being flooded. The power would have to be shut down in short order. With this sobering information, the captain headed immediately for Watch Hill, the nearest shore. Within minutes, the engines fell silent and, with no pumps or forward motion, the *Metis* was quickly sinking. She went down at around 5:00 A.M. in 130 feet of water, about 3½ nautical miles off Watch Hill.

Lifeboats were lowered and some who could not board them jumped overboard, lifejackets on, desperately looking for anything to hold on to. The hurricane deck broke away from the hull with the smokestack still encased in the deck. It was reported that there were a great number of passengers still on this deck when it became an oversized raft. With the still-gusting wind and waves, the wreckage was being driven towards Watch Hill.

While there had been no federal lifesaving service yet established there were some individual rescue operations along the coast. One of them, the Humane Society of Massachusetts, had kept a metal lifeboat at Watch Hill since 1849. This was launched with retired lighthouse keeper Daniel F. Larkin, who also owned the Larkin House, a famous Watch Hill hotel.

At about 7:30 A.M. Larkin had gathered four other volunteers: Captain Jared Crandall, Albert Crandall, Byron Green and Frank Larkin to launch the metal lifeboat. They succeeded in rescuing seventeen victims of the disaster, which was all the lifeboat could carry. An hour later, a reliable fishing boat was launched for the rescue attempt with Captain John D. Harvey, Courtland Gavitt, Edwin M. Nash, William H. Nash, and Eugene Nash on board. This rescue crew picked up fifteen live persons and six bodies. All those retrieved from the disaster were put on the U.S.S. Moccasin which had sailed out of Stonington to assist in the rescue.

Although Captain Burton’s license was revoked, he was reinstated in six months to the same route as

his former disastrous command, much to the dismay of the *Metis*’ survivors. Captain Daniel Larkin and the other rescuers (ten in all) received gold medals from the President of the United States and certificates of heroism from the Humane Society of Massachusetts.

Of the daring rescuers who rose to the occasion, one would later become an adventurer of sorts. His name was Joseph Courtland Gavitt, and as a porter at the Larkin House, did not stand out as the adventurous type. In 1874 he became a member of the first Westerly Police Force. He resigned his position with the Westerly police force the following year to be a conductor with the Providence and Pawtucket Horse Railroad. Early in 1877 he returned to Westerly and was again employed with the Westerly Police Force. But before the year was out, he signed on with Edwin D. Scholfield of Westerly for a voyage aboard the whaleship *Mabel*, sailing out of New Bedford. He did not return with the *Mabel*, having jumped ship in Tasmania. There he joined their police force and advanced to detective (having married, it is said, the police chief’s daughter). He had an extended family, but two of his sons died in accidents. “Cort” Gavitt wrote to his niece in Westerly, R.I. in 1932 indicating his regrets at having lost his medal by mistake. His medal was let out to a dishonest jeweler to be made into a watch case, but the gold was not returned. Mr. Gavitt died in Tasmania.

The wreck of the *Metis* remains off Watch Hill in 130 feet of water. The engine stands about 25 feet from the bottom and the drive shaft extends 75 feet to the propeller, which also stands off the bottom. The boiler is said to be upright with a few pieces of wood from the bulkhead which had been in front of it.

In 2002, after 130 years, the *Metis* added one more name to its list of casualties. Joseph Pasquale, during a sponsored dive with his organization from Massachusetts, perished while exploring the wreck. In 2006 a memorial plaque was placed on a boulder along the shoreline off Spray Rock Road. Other than mentioning his family and friends, little information can be gleaned from its inscription, nor is it known why the plaque was placed in the location chosen. The rock was rotated 180 degrees the year after the plaque was installed so that it now faces the road rather than the surf. Visitors who enjoy the scenic views from this place may not have known Mr. Pasquale, but like the *Metis*, he remains part of Watch Hill’s history for ever after.

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



Westerly Historical Society Annual Meeting and Dinner Ticket Order Form

Location: Venice Restaurant
165 Shore Road, Westerly RI 02891

Please send me _____ tickets for the
Westerly Historical Society Annual Meeting
and Reception on May 17, 2017 @ \$26.00 ea.

Enclosed please find my check for \$_____

Name(s)_____

Address_____

City_____

State and Postal Code_____

Please indicate your entrée preference(s):

Chicken Piccata _____

Baked Cod _____

Cocktails at 5:30 PM
Dinner will be served at 6:00 PM

Send this form with your check or money
order before April 28th to:

Westerly Historical Society
PO Box 91
Westerly, RI 02891

**Internet orders may be placed on our
website at**
<http://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/annual-meeting>

or click on the words “**Annual Meeting**” from
our home page.