



# Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

January-February 2017

## Westerly Historical Society Officers 2016-2017

### President

Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

### Vice President

Vacant

### Secretary

Maria L. Bernier

### Treasurer

Ann L. Smith

### Archivist

Janice B. Tunney

### Babcock-Smith House Museum Liaison

Edward A. Fazio

### Membership Chair

Joanne Pendola

### Newsletter

Ann L. Smith

### Programs

Pamela J. Scott

### Web Master

Maria L. Bernier

### Members At Large

Dwight C. Brown, Jr.

John Leach

Brenda Linton

Thomas A. O'Connell

Thomas E. Wright

## Calendar of Events



### February 12, Sunday 2:00 P.M.

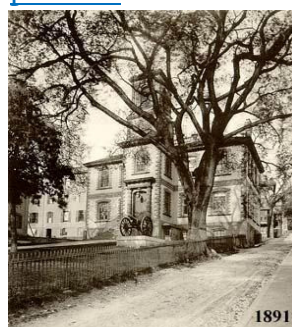
Lorén Spears, Executive Director of Tomaquag Museum will share about Narragansett history and culture, the Indigenous Empowerment Network and the growth of the award- winning Tomaquag Museum.



### March 5, Sunday 2:00 P.M.

Joy Emery, Professor emerita and curator of the URI Commercial Pattern Archive will speak about Historic Sewing Patterns. Please refer to Page 7 of this issue of *Westerly's Witness* for more information on Professor Emery and her work with this collection

or visit <https://today.uri.edu/news/uri-professor-emerita-writes-book-about-history-of-paper-sewing-patterns/>



### April 2, Sunday, 2:00 P.M.

Jane Elizabeth D. Warburton, Senior Architectural Historian, Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission (SHPO) will talk about the National Register of Historic Places, and historic preservation in Westerly.

Visit <http://www.preservation.ri.gov/>

### 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/>

## Babcock-Smith House Museum Presents

### *After ABRAHAM LINCOLN:*

### *What Went Wrong?*

February 5, 2017 - 2:00 P.M.

(New Date!)



Frank J. Williams, Chief Justice (Retired) of the Rhode Island Supreme Court and noted Lincoln scholar, has rescheduled his follow up on the Civil War to February 5, 2017 at 2:00 P.M. as he explores the question, "After Abraham Lincoln: What Went Wrong?" Judge Williams is an engaging speaker and a past guest lecturer at the Babcock-Smith House Museum.

## Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

Our friend Steven Slosberg wrote a piece for the *Westerly Sun* last month about the naming of Yosemite Valley Road in Westerly. After he inquired at several local organizations, including the Westerly Historical Society, no definite answer could be found as to how this road got its name. After pondering the question a bit, vague thoughts of the 1850s came to mind: the California Gold Rush, the discovery of Yosemite Valley itself, and the stormy encounters occurring between pioneering settlers and our nation's Native peoples. Given the natural beauty of the landscapes, the presence of Native tribes, and the personal prosperity common to Watch Hill and central California after the Gold Rush, one can only wonder if some nostalgic connection to the West inspired the naming of Yosemite Valley Road.

The mystique of Yosemite Valley alone may have been enough to inspire the naming of a road. For those who had traveled there in the 1800s, what more beautiful place could there have been than this "Never-Land" where the streams were flowing with flakes of gold, the mountains cleaved into breathtaking waterfalls, and the explorers and Natives had at last settled into a peaceful societal harmony? The famous photographer Ansel Adams (1902-1984) would later find his inspiration in Yosemite Valley and returned frequently to capture its beauty on film.



Ansel Adams "Nevada Fall, Rainbow"  
Yosemite National Park, 1947

We still don't know who is responsible for the name, "Yosemite Valley Road," nor do we know why the name was chosen, but the search for an answer opened the door to research on the national

phenomenon known as the California Gold Rush and information on how it affected people across the country, including those in our own little neck of the woods. We hope you enjoy our piece, "All that Glitters..." (beginning on Page 4 of this issue) for a short history of the New England "Argonauts" and the people they left behind.

Speaking of research, Westerly Historical Society members gathered in mid-January for the second annual pot-luck dinner and research sharing event. Football games notwithstanding, our faithful regulars enjoyed an afternoon of good food and history as we compared our experiences surrounding our latest endeavors. A program recap of this most delightful afternoon appears on the following page (Page 3).

In February we will be excited to present Lorén Spears, the Executive Director of the Tomaquag Museum, for her presentation on the Narragansett's history and culture, the Indigenous Empowerment Network, and the growth of the award-winning Tomaquag Museum. (See details regarding the time and date on Page 1.) Ms. Spears is a nationally recognized educator, author, and advocate for the awareness of Native culture and history. She works tirelessly to empower Native youth and to educate the public on Native history, culture, the environment and the arts. We hope you plan to attend this informative talk.

On Page 7 we bring you a news item from the University of Rhode Island concerning Professor Emerita Joy Spanabel Emery, our March speaker. Professor Emery has been awarded the 2016 Distinguished Achievement Award in Costume Design and Technology from the United States Institute for Theatre Technology. We are pleased to welcome her to the Carriage House and look forward to an interesting presentation.

Lastly, we were deeply saddened to learn of the passing of two of our well-known members, Donn Barclay, husband of Meg Barclay, and Dr. Herbert Nieburg, husband of former board member, Lise Mayers-Nieburg. We wish to express our deepest sympathies to Meg and Lise and to their extended families at this difficult time. A short memorial for each of our departed friends appears on Page 8.

## ***Program Review: Pot-Luck Dinner and Members' Research Sharing Event***

*By Ann L. Smith*

The Westerly Historical Society, it turns out, is full of “closet” historians. Even though the membership requirement of writing and presenting a historical essay was dropped in the 1970s, members continue to prove that they have a passion for preserving our memories of the past. On January 15, 2017, program chairperson Pamela Scott surprised us all with a spectacular lineup of members who were willing to share their latest historical passions.

The event began with a pot-luck meal and, as was the case last year, the members did not disappoint with their selections of food offerings. Miraculously and without planning, we shared our fill of appetizers, entrees and desserts. The food itself was so enjoyable, in fact, that we were pressed to tear ourselves away from eating in order to start the research presentations.

The first to take the floor was Dwight C. Brown, Jr., member-at-large of our Executive Board. For those who do not know Dwight personally, one can scarcely appreciate the lifetime of data that he has amassed on our local history. We are hard-pressed to think of anyone more informed of the maritime history of Westerly or who has a larger library of articles and photographs about Westerly and the surrounding area. Dwight Brown has also lectured extensively on the Bradford Dying Association from which he retired years ago after several decades of loyal service.

Dwight Brown's talk was on the wreck of the *Metis*, one of the most notable shipwrecks to have occurred at Watch Hill in its history. As with all historical research, each new fact discovered often leads to more questions. In the case of the *Metis*, we were surprised to learn that one of the decorated rescuers, Joseph Courtland Gavitt, recipient of a Presidential Gold Medal, spent his later life in Tasmania as a member of its police force. It was not uncommon, we learned, for men to repatriate to foreign countries if they had already traveled there in the course of their duties aboard whaling or cargo ships. Such was the case for Joseph Gavitt.

Next we heard from Mary Weiss about the upcoming “Bricks and Murals” project slated for downtown Westerly later this year. Up to sixteen buildings will be painted with turn-of-the- (20<sup>th</sup>) century style artwork depicting Westerly's most historic events and places. The work will be done by volunteer “wall-dogs” and the images are expected to last up to fifty years. For more information visit

<http://www.bricksandmurals.org/>.

Jeff Benson brought us up to date on his genealogical research and his ties to the Wilcox and Swan families. Jeff's mother, Dorothy (Dot) Benson was a genealogist and worked for many years in the research section of the Westerly Library. Jeff treated us to reprints of David Panciera's essay, “Westerly Witness: Ethan Wilcox 1841-1919” which was presented before the Westerly Historical Society in April, 1989.

Our readers may recall a piece we did about the 1929 sailboat races in Watch Hill (see *Westerly's Witness*, April 2014 at <https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/whs-newsletter-2014-04.pdf>.) Sal Lombardi and his wife Micheline had donated an old sailing trophy from the period and became members at that time. We were delighted that Sal and Micheline braved the cold in their (unheated) 1941 Cadillac to treat us all with stories of their antique car. Sal took us outside to examine the war-time gas rationing sticker and the other little customizations on it that were reminiscent of the World War II era.

Not to be upstaged by her husband Sal, Micheline talked about her book, *Mangia with Micheline: A Journey of my Life Through Stories and Recipes About Family, Friends, and the Good Old Days*. Started as a column in a small-town newspaper, *Mangia with Micheline* is as much a cookbook as it is a history of family life filled with heart-warming, humorous, and remarkable personal tales. It celebrates memories shared around the family dining room and kitchen table. Dedicated to her mother, the book contains two generations of wisdom, stories, and recipes. It aims to preserve the nostalgia of an American family of Italian descent as it imparts the cherished and time-honored recipes that reflect Micheline's culinary talent. With any luck we may be the happy recipients of an excerpt from Micheline's book which we will run as a guest column in a future issue. Micheline's book is available for purchase at Amazon.com.

The board members would like to thank all who participated in this members-only event, even if not as a presenter. This (now) annual event is a special one due to our ability to relax, eat, and share as an intimate group while enjoying one another's company. We hope you will join us next year!

# All That Glitters...

By Ann L. Smith

*The amount of gold someone has is never the issue, but rather the love of it and the want of more for personal gain that consumes the hearts of many good people. — A. J. Darkholme, Rise of the Morningstar*

Anyone who lived through the Viet Nam War era remembers the effect it had on our families and on the families of our loved ones and neighbors. It seems as though our entire existence then was caught up in the ongoing conflict in Southeast Asia. Today journalism students are taught that Viet Nam was the first war to be brought into our living rooms via television, and, it was not just the war, but the riots and protests that arose because of it which infiltrated our daily family time as we tuned in to watch the nightly news.

War objectors moved to Canada, joined the reserves, or stayed in college to keep their feet firmly planted on this continent rather than somewhere else. Each day brought the latest reports on which brothers, cousins, or neighbors were being shipped or flown out. Other news contained the names of those who were coming home, and sadly, some we laid to rest.

When a major national event takes our loved ones from our midst, even temporarily, the texture of our social fabric coarsens and cracks just a little bit. Family members inherit new roles. Responsibilities are foisted on young ones who, if not for the matters at hand, might have been able to remain as children a little while longer.

Just as war breaks up families, so too did the Rush for Gold in 1849. At that time a wave of excitement began to sweep our nation born out of the news that gold had been discovered at Sutter's Mill in Coloma, California. As the news spread, a fever-like madness also took hold and infected every family in every town from the east coast to the west. Preachers, like the Reverend James Davis of the First Congregational Church in Woonsocket, warned of the breakup of families and intimated that whatever wealth was to be had could not be more valuable than the young men's presence here at home:

This excitement is become truly appalling, and reaching not our cities alone, but our villages and towns and shaking every family. There never has been any excitement equal to it within the remembrance of our oldest citizens. —War, Pestilence, Famine—all these have

never filled our land and the minds of our young men with such intense excitement. ...The gold pestilence which is more terrific than the cholera, threatens to depopulate our land of those whom we had looked upon as the morning stars and bright hopes of future times.

Families everywhere debated the risks and rewards of sending their loved ones off to the unsettled fields of California. How long would they be gone? How much money would they stand to make? How would they cover their family's debts at home? And, where would they get the funds to finance the trip? In the end, some thought better of it and stayed behind while others made hurried arrangements to secure passage by boat or wagon-train, and left as soon as possible in search of their fortunes.

In Westerly a schooner named *Sovereign* captained by Palmer Hall of Lotteryville (Avondale)



CAPTAIN PALMER HALL

set out in with a party of Argonauts the fall of 1849. The schooner *Sovereign* had been built in 1846 on the west bank of the Pawcatuck River. A two-masted sailing vessel, at 98 tons she wasn't the heaviest boat nor was she the smallest. Against all predictions the *Sovereign* rounded Cape Horn and landed safely at San Francisco July 12, 1850.

Not much is known of the fate of her passengers. Like *Sovereign* herself, many never came home.

(continued on Page 5)



## All That Glitters...

*(Continued from Page 4)*

Upon arriving in San Francisco, the 49ers had no interest in making a prompt return trip, and there was little demand for eastward travel by others, so the *Sovereign* was sold several times and worked as a cargo vessel serving the coastal towns between Oregon and San Francisco. She once made the trip to Hawaii and the cargo's owner sued the captain for the loss of goods, the ship having been nearly sunk in a storm along the way.

By 1867 the *Sovereign* was listed on the delinquent tax rolls of the City of San Francisco, with its captain (Elihu Avery) owing a sum of \$110.50. The *Sovereign* ran a few more years and wrecked twice, the second as she ran into the rocks at Duncan's Landing in a fog in 1873. Her skipper's name was "Captain Ross." By 1876 she was listed in an audit report as the personal property of the City of San Francisco, with an assessed value of \$2,000, having been abandoned in the San Francisco Bay.

Captain Palmer Hall returned to Westerly by some other means than the way he left. His first wife, Mary Ann Dunbar died in 1864. In 1865 Captain Hall married Nancy Bowler at the home of Nancy's daughter in Buffalo, NY. They lived a charmed life at India Point (Westerly) until Nancy Bowler Hall died in 1887. Captain Palmer Hall died on June 14, 1888 and is buried in River Bend Cemetery.

We do not know how long Palmer Hall had lingered on the west coast or if he found fortune among the 49ers. We know that his relative, Captain John Frank "Uncle Frank" Hall also went to San Francisco and, according to his letters, considered staying on to farm, although he didn't. Whatever his lot, Palmer Hall eventually returned home to the New England he loved and lived out his days among his original friends and relatives. As for his passengers, one can only glean what their lives must have been like by reading the accounts of theirs and other New Englanders who made the long trek in search of gold.

We know that the presence of women in the California of the 1850s was relatively scarce. Men wrote home of the hardships involved in cooking and sewing for themselves. Most of the females found in the mining towns were showgirls or prostitutes, and some worked as both at the same time. Men wrote

home to their wives and sweethearts in the hopes of preserving their love relationships until the day of their eventual return.

Other letters describe the hyperinflation at the outset of the Gold Rush, which lessened somewhat at the 1850s progressed. One account tells how a man, upon arriving at a mining camp, was greeted with an offer of \$50.00 for the boots he was wearing. The situation was one of extreme wealth with little or no available goods on which to spend it. In local taverns there no longer was any way to judge a person's worth by assessing his attire. The most worn and patched buckskins were often sported by men whose wealth far outweighed that of well-heeled lawyers and doctors in the very same room. Men smoking tobacco in solid-gold pipes or cleaning their teeth with toothpicks of gold were a common sight. Eventually goods from China, Australia, South America, and elsewhere arrived by boat and prices normalized to a degree.

The presence of extreme wealth generated a love for gambling and many lost in the towns what was won in the camps. No matter how the preachers back East had warned of the dangers, many succumbed to perils of gold fever in more ways than one.

Sickness claimed the lives of some 49ers and others survived illness without any real medical attention to help them. People wrote of the loving kindness of their fellow miners (not all of whom rose to the occasion) when laid out with fevers or other maladies. One letter in particular mentioned how a fellow camp-mate brought some chicken soup and stayed in the miner's tent through the night as a means of nursing him back to health. Ezra Stillman, a Westerly, RI man who had sailed on the *Sovereign* wrote home in 1850 with the news that the ship's third mate, Amos P. Pendleton, contracted cholera and died. Pendleton, who sold bread, "had gone out in the morning, supplied his customers, returned and ate breakfast, and a few moments later was taken with Cholera and died before night."

Captain John F. Hall aptly described the mining efforts as a kind of lottery: "Some are doing well, others by the side of them are hardly making board." A few lucky prospectors made small fortunes and smartly returned to Rhode Island to enjoy them.

*(Continued on Page 6)*

## All That Glitters...

(Continued from Page 5)

Others shipped their bags of gold dust to their families at home so as to fulfill their original promises of wealth and to save themselves from the shame of an ill-fated decision. The *Newport Daily News* ran the following short piece on December 25, 1850:

We were yesterday shown a solid lump of gold worth one thousand dollars; it is owned by Mr. George Staigg, of this town and is a portion of the result of his industry in California.

One can only wonder if the paper's readership knew that Mr. Staigg's literal good fortune was not common to all men among miners, or what the paper's motivation was in running the story.

Among those who stayed for a decade or more, some returned home in search of their lost loved ones. Others stayed on but found the humble courage, while still poor, to reach out to their relatives by mail. Albert G. Tucker, an area native, exchanged letters with his father in 1861 after an eleven-year absence of communication. He was heartbroken to learn of his mother's passing and expressed melancholy that the little sister he remembered as a schoolgirl was now married with two children of her own.

Thomas Sheridan, steward of the *Sovereign*, returned destitute to New York City in 1866 and wrote to attorney Charles P. Williams of Stonington with this plea:

Excuse the liberty I have taken in writing to you this letter, but necessity compels me to do so. Circumstances compelled me to leave San Francisco, California on the 13<sup>th</sup> February and arrived here on Sunday evening last. Being a perfect stranger in this city also penniless, you will be doing me an act of kindness by loaning me fifty dollars (\$50.00) until [the] 20<sup>th</sup> of April.

I am the young man who went to California in the schooner *Sovereign* with Captain Hall in the year 1849. No doubt you remember me as I was in your employ for five years. Enclosed you will find my photograph. Please address immediately to the New England Hotel, N<sup>o</sup>. 30 Bowery, New York City, NY and [I] Remain Your Obt.  
[Obedient] Servant,

Thomas Sheridan

The photograph of Thomas Sheridan has been lovingly preserved in the Charles P. Williams manuscript collection at the Mystic Seaport Museum. A slightly edited reproduction appears below.



THOMAS SHERIDAN, STEWARD OF THE *SOVEREIGN*  
(PHOTO COURTESY OF MYSTIC SEAPORT)

Sheridan wrote again to Williams just two weeks later, having received no response to his first inquiry. He made an impassioned plea for the needed funds saying that he had not seen his brother or sister in twenty-two years and was searching for them. It is not known what happened to Mr. Sheridan or if he ever found his family. Sheridan's story, however is representative of so many others in which families were broken and loved ones lost.

The lucky few who returned East with new-found wealth resettled comfortably into their New England lives. Both Captains Hall (Palmer and John Frank) returned to their lives on and around the Pawcatuck River. Others came home with little or nothing to show for their efforts and attempted as best they could to rebuild their lives. Still others remained in the West, either because they found contentment in their new endeavors or because they were unable to bear the shame of having tried and failed to find their fortunes. Of those who never returned, some of their histories have been preserved for posterity by means of their letters home. For others, the records of their lives have been forever lost.

~ ~ ~

*We wish to acknowledge Dwight C. Brown,  
Westerly Historical Society Board Member-at-large  
for his assistance with this article.*

# URI Professor Emerita Wins National Award for Largest Sewing Pattern Collection in the World

*University of Rhode Island Office of External Relations and Communications*

KINGSTON, R.I., It started decades ago with an old pattern for a skirt worn by an actress in the University of Rhode Island production “Anne of Green Gables.” Joy Spanabel Emery was starstruck.

One pattern led to two, and now Emery, a professor emerita of theater and former adjunct professor of textiles, fashion merchandising and design at URI, has the largest collection of sewing patterns in the world—50,000 on paper and 61,000 in an electronic database.

Over the years, she’s received many honors for her devotion to clothing patterns, and now a national organization that promotes theater design is recognizing her.

Emery, of West Kingston, has won the 2016 Distinguished Achievement Award in Costume Design and Technology from the United States Institute for Theatre Technology.

“I was stunned,” says Emery. “The award has been given to so many people I respect enormously. I was very pleased to have my work recognized. It’s a remarkable acknowledgement of my work. I’m thrilled.”

Founded in 1960, the organization promotes dialogue, research and learning among people involved in theater design and technology. The achievement award is given annually to a person who has excelled in design or technology in the performing arts or entertainment industry.

Emery retired from teaching in 2000 and is curator of URI’s Commercial Pattern Archive at the Robert L. Carothers Library and Learning Commons. The collection dates back to 1847 and represents nearly 100 different companies. Besides dressmaking patterns, the collection includes men’s tailoring journals, fashion periodicals, pattern catalogs and historical sewing manuals from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the present.



PROFESSOR EMERITUS JOY EMERY. PHOTO BY NORA LEWIS

A costume designer, Emery says her collection is a labor of love—and a wonderful way for costume designers to research what clothing actors should wear during performances. The collection includes everything from 1870 smoking jackets for men and 1950s cocktail party aprons to bodices and Zoot suits—over-sized jackets and baggy pants worn in the 1940s.

Details about the patterns can be found in Emery’s book, *The History of the Paper Pattern Industry: the Home Dressmaking Fashion Revolution*. For more information about the book and collection, call Emery at 401-874-2713.

“Patterns give insight into everyday wear,” says Emery. “They’re a wonderful resource for costume designers.”

*(Joy Spanabel Emery will be our featured speaker in March 2017 at the Carriage House. See “Calendar of Events” on Page 1 for details.)*

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



### *In Memoriam*



**Dr. Herbert Nieburg**, 70, of Westerly, passed away Monday, Jan. 2, 2017, at home.

He was the beloved husband of Lise Mayers-Nieburg and loving uncle to Ryan

Nieburg, Joshua, Samuel and Daniel Rosenberg, and Melissa and Seth Tackling.

Dr. Nieburg was a vibrant individual who believed in helping others and giving back to the community. This carried through to his passion for his work as a dedicated psychologist and professor at Mitchell College. Dr. Nieburg also authored several books and was a long-time member of the Westerly Historical Society. A celebration of his life will be held in Westerly at a future date.



**Donn J. Barclay**, devoted family man, avid bridge player and life-long New York Football Giants fan died on Jan. 1, 2017. He was 94. Mr. Barclay was a history lover who read and traveled

widely. He was fascinated by the history of Westerly and its connection to the granite industry. Donn was a docent at the Babcock-Smith House Museum and a regular master at the bridge table. He was predeceased by his wife, Annaliese and his four sisters. Survivors include his wife, Margaret Saunders Barclay; four children, Karen and husband, Richard; Donn L. Barclay; Lauren Anderson and husband Robert; Claudia Barclay; three grandchildren, four great-grandchildren and two step-sons.