



# Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

March 2022

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## *Calendar of Events*

**Wednesday, April 13 , 2022**

**6:30 PM – 7:30 PM**

***“Digging Up the Past”***

**Presented by Matthew Hayden**

This presentation will include a discussion and display of the many historical items found locally by a police detective who enjoys treasure hunting with a metal detector. He has been scouring local fields for long lost items and has amassed quite a collection of small bits of history which have literally been pulled from the earth in Westerly after years of waiting and resting just inches beneath our feet.

**Wednesday, May 11 , 2022**

**6:30 PM – 7:30 PM**

***“The Westerly Jewelry Fire”***

**Presented by Joseph Fusaro**

This presentation will include a discussion of the 1975 fire which destroyed 64 High Street and the Westerly Jewelry Company's former location. Numerous photographs and a detailed description of the valiant efforts of firefighters will be presented. Joseph Fusaro is an assistant fire chief of the Westerly Fire Department and the unofficial historian of the many fires that have occurred throughout Westerly.

~ ~ ~

*Programs will be Held at the Carriage House  
of the Babcock-Smith House Museum  
124 Granite Street, Westerly, RI  
Free Admission  
Complimentary Refreshments*



# WESTERLY'S WITNESS

Published by the Westerly Historical Society  
P. O. Box 91, Westerly, RI 02891, seven times per  
year in January, March, April, May, September,  
October and November

The mission of the Westerly Historical Society is to  
research, study, and preserve the local history in  
our community. We are a dedicated, all-volunteer,  
non-profit organization that owns numerous  
historical artifacts and an extensive photographic  
collection.

## CONTACT US

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## President's Corner

*Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.*

Hello friends, welcome to Spring! Our  
preparations for the WHS annual meeting and dinner  
are coming together nicely and I am happy to report  
we will be returning to the Haversham Restaurant for  
this year's gathering. It also gives me great pleasure to  
announce that the executive board unanimously  
selected Nina Wright as our recipient of the 2022 Julia  
Award! Nina is an amazing advocate for local history.  
Nina is the gatekeeper, so to speak, of the local history  
room at the Westerly Public Library. Her dedication  
and direction have enabled so many to conduct  
research for work or pleasure with the greatest of ease.

A few new ideas we are working on for your  
enjoyment are a WHS trivia night and a potential  
gathering of many local historical societies for you and  
the public to meet and learn more about the history of  
our town and our neighboring communities.

We still have officer positions open on our ever-  
growing executive board and have room for more  
board members at large. If interested please contact  
me at [WHSPresident@gmail.com](mailto:WHSPresident@gmail.com).

See you soon,

Tom

## EDITOR'S NOTES

*Ann L. Smith*

Across from the High Street post office, the  
imposing home of the former Industrial Trust  
Company stands tall in all its glory. The place is no  
longer a bank (it has no identity, in fact, since it is  
currently unoccupied) and is the property of the  
Westerly Land Trust. But etched into the façade of  
the building for all eternity are the words,  
INDUSTRIAL TRUST COMPANY. To the left of  
the door, the year 1887 is displayed in Roman  
numerals, and on the right side, the year 1915 appears  
as MCCCXV. (For those who remember their  
elementary-level lessons, the modern way to write  
1915 using Roman numerals would be MCMXV.  
But it seems that in days gone by, the use of four  
numerals was interchangeable with the shorter  
convention of inserting a lesser number before a  
larger one to denote one less than the larger.)  
To find out why the years 1887 and 1915 were etched  
in stone on the Industrial Trust, turn to "Where Was

It?" on Page 4 of this month's issue.

Our feature this month is "A Trip to the Town  
Clerk's Vault" (Page 6), and we have included a recap  
of our March program and demonstration (presented  
by Robert Boucher) on Page 3.

Our annual meeting and dinner reception is fast  
approaching. Please see Page 8 for more information.

We welcome your comments, suggestions and  
submissions and we have a new, separate email  
address for all things related to *Westerly's Witness*. It  
is [WHSNewsletterEditor@gmail.com](mailto:WHSNewsletterEditor@gmail.com).

**CORRECTION:** In our January-February 2022 issue  
we incorrectly printed the email address for program  
info as [programs@westerlyhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:programs@westerlyhistoricalsociety.org). The  
correct email is [WHSPrograms@gmail.com](mailto:WHSPrograms@gmail.com). We  
regret the error.

# Program Review: The Soldiers of the Civil War

By Ann L. Smith

This month the Westerly Historical Society kicked off its new evening program format with a presentation by board member, Robert “Bob” Boucher. Bob has been a civil war reenactor for almost thirty years and is president of the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment Connecticut Volunteer Infantry, Company A, Inc. He has participated in hundreds of reenactments and events throughout the East Coast from Virginia to New Hampshire.

On Wednesday, March 9, a couple of dozen interested folks braved the slushy, windy weather to enjoy Bob’s informative presentation. The audience was delighted to see Bob dressed the full regalia of a Union soldier as they filed into the room. Standing behind a folding table loaded with canteens, mess kits, old utensils and the like, Bob completed his look by having his 1857 Springfield rifle, bayonet, and haversack ready at hand.



The sheer volume of information Bob Boucher provided about the life of Civil War soldiers was nearly overwhelming. Everything from the type of food they ate, the uniforms they wore, and the sufferings they endured was presented. Each aspect of the soldiers’ Civil War experience brought with it some interesting or unusual

fact. For example, bayonets were rarely used for killing. The need to be within close proximity to kill one’s opponent combined with the more usual tactics involving firearms made death by bayonet a rare occurrence. The bayonet more often would be fixed to the end of a soldier’s rifle and shoved into the ground to make a post on which to lean.

When casualties did occur, wounded soldiers were seen by army doctors who employed the most primitive of care. Limbs were quite often shattered in battle, and the usual way of dealing with this kind of injury was amputation. Bob Boucher attributes the expression “sawbones” (a euphemism for “physician”) to the Civil War era. We heard that chest wounds were almost always fatal, and that maggots were used often to clean non-fatal (especially infected) wounds.

Surprisingly, the majority of deaths among Civil War soldiers were not caused by injury, but by disease. Historians estimate that among the Civil War dead, the ratio of illness to injuries was seven to one.

There have been other wars with even worse statistics, however, such as the Mexican-American War where for every man killed in battle, thirteen died of disease. The number one cause of death from illness in the Civil War was diarrhea.

When Bob is with his regiment performing reenactments, he sleeps in the original style “pup tents” issued by the government at that time. The soldiers were known to say that these small tents into which one had to crawl in order to bed down, were not fit even for dogs. Hence the name, “pup-tent.” His unit carries their traditional silk flags and each participant carries all the gear that a Union Army soldier would have had with him on a battlefield.



ROBERT BOUCHER

Of the traditional flags there were two: a state flag, and another with the regimental crest. The state flags resembled an American flag with the state’s emblem inserted where the field of blue normally appears.

Perhaps the most stirring story of the evening was told near the end of the presentation. Bob Boucher recounted how a direct descendent of a local Civil War hero reenacted the moment when his great-great-grandfather captured the flag of the Tennessee 14<sup>th</sup>. The (modern-day) Tennessee 14<sup>th</sup> Regiment allowed their flag to be taken during the reenactment so as to replay history according to actual events. Allowing the flag be taken by a direct descendent of the original soldier who first captured it was as close to reality as a reenactment can get. What a moment to actually “be” your ancestor for a day. Only, in this case, the flag of the Tennessee 14<sup>th</sup> was returned to them at the end of the day as a matter of courtesy.

Bob enjoys the time spent with his reenactment regiment, and has worked with the U.S. National Park Service at Antietam, Gettysburg, Fredricksburg, and Spotsylvania National Battlefields for preservation and real-time events..



# LAST CALL!

## WESTERLY HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND BABCOCK-SMITH HOUSE MUSEUM HISTORY AWARD



An annual award of up to \$500.00 will be given to a person or persons, grade 5 through adulthood, who furthers the mission of researching, studying, and/or preserving local history in our community. Secondary consideration will be given to someone who exhibits a passion for history unrelated to the local community.

Application or nomination must be submitted by **April 1, 2022** by mail to

Westerly Historical Society  
PO Box 91  
Westerly, RI 02891

or by email to [whspresident@gmail.com](mailto:whspresident@gmail.com).

**Note: Additional supporting material or information may be submitted with an application, but will not be returned**

The application form can be found on the Babcock- Smith House Museum website and on the Westerly Historical Society website.  
<https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/history-award/>

or at:

<http://babcocksmithhouse.org/>

A copy of the application form appears on Page 5 of this newsletter.

Babcock-Smith House Museum  
Presents

## *Sherlock's Books* Sunday, March 27 , 2022 2:30 PM

On March 27 at 2:00 PM, retired English professor Bob Madison will offer a discussion of the books of Sherlock Holmes—not the books in which the famous detective appeared, but the books that appeared in Arthur Conan Doyle's famous stories.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was himself especially fond of books, as he wrote in his bibliographical memoir *Through the Magic Door*, and many of Doyle's favorites shaped his well-known Baker Street characters. Professor Madison will share the research for his recent *Baker Street Journal* article, including having on hand copies of the volumes purported to have been consulted by Holmes and his chronicler, Dr. John Watson.

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

## Where Was It?



The Niantic Bank was founded in Westerly in 1854. It became a national institution on February 2, 1865. Throughout its existence, the bank was located at 14 High Street. A large fire consumed an entire block in February of 1888 and left the bank but a shell.

On January 11, 1905, the National Niantic Bank was acquired by the Industrial Trust Company and its offices became the Westerly branch of that institution. Records indicate that the original brick building was rebuilt in **1915** in granite in the Beaux-Arts style, although images of the structure bear the date **1887**, (ie. MDCCCLXXXVII). This likely refers to the year that the Industrial Trust Company was founded in Providence (which was indeed 1887) and not the year the building was constructed.

[www.ricurrency.com/bank-name/niantic-bank/](http://www.ricurrency.com/bank-name/niantic-bank/)



## WESTERLY HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND BABCOCK-SMITH HOUSE MUSEUM HISTORY AWARD



### APPLICATION AND/OR NOMINATION FORM

An annual award of up to \$500.00 will be given to a person or persons, grade 5 through adulthood, who furthers the mission of researching, studying, and/or preserving local history in our community. Secondary consideration will be given to someone who exhibits a passion for history unrelated to the local community.

Applications are available online at [babcocksmithhouse.org](http://babcocksmithhouse.org) or [westerlyhistoricalsociety.org](http://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org).

Application or nomination must be submitted by April 1 by direct mail to Westerly Historical Society, PO Box 91, Westerly, RI 02891 or by email to [whspresident@gmail.com](mailto:whspresident@gmail.com).

Name of candidate:

Address:

Phone:

Email:

If this is a nomination, please list your name and contact information:

Please describe the candidate's contribution to local history research, study, or preservation. Additional supporting information may also be submitted, **but will not be returned.**

# A Trip to the Town Clerk's Vault

By Ann L. Smith

Anyone who is a fan of antique documents drawn up with pen and ink would be thrilled to see what's in store at the Westerly Town Clerk's Office. Under the care and supervision of Donna Giordano, the Office of the Town Clerk is a busy place. The staff works as a cohesive team; fielding questions over the phone, helping walk-ins with needs for document copies and handling requests for the recording of official documents. While everything seems to be happening at once out at the counter, inside the vault is an impeccably organized collection of what can only be described as Westerly's collective memory. If one could imagine the town as a person, the documents in its vault would be the blood in its veins; its very DNA.

Consider that official records dating back to 1661 are available from the town clerk. Every recorded birth (before 1960), death (before 2022), deed transfer, marriage, and more are reflected by the materials stored in the clerk's vault. (Records of births after 1959 and deaths occurring after January 1, 2022 are now recorded at the state level.) For local historians, the bulk of what they usually seek is found at the town clerk's office.

At the Westerly Historical Society we often get requests for old birth, marriage, and death information. Some of these requests are related to a person's need to prove their lineage to gain admittance to a society or club, like the Daughters of the American Revolution. Others folks are involved in documenting their ancestry as part of a memoir or other historical project. Whatever the case, people should be happy to know that even though the records they need are centuries old, they still exist via the town clerk's office. By contrast, whatever might be found in the archives of the Westerly Historical Society is likely incidental information, and perhaps not the best source for documenting one's genealogy.

The cataloguing of vital statistics and land records is only the beginning of what town clerks do, however. In Westerly the town clerk is responsible for maintaining meeting minutes of the town council and the various boards and committees working within the town. Military records (filed voluntarily by service members), naturalization records, trade names, wills and probate records, and burial permits are among the other things that are maintained in the clerk's vault.

When in need of obtaining a copy of a vital record, How often do we say, "I need a copy of my birth certificate." But the original birth certificate is not in the town hall. That document would have been delivered to one's parents at the time their birth was recorded. What clerks maintain are indexes of vital records, and certificates are issued based on the information in those indexes.

Let's suppose for a moment that a person decided to request a birth certificate for a long lost relative. Records of birth older than 100 years are public information, as is information on deaths occurring more than fifty years ago. For more recent records, availability is restricted to the subject person or their immediate family. Identification is required and a fee of \$25 (or \$22 for walk-ins) must be included at the time of the request for restricted records.

Land evidence records at the clerk's office are comprised of not only the indexes, but any documents pertaining to a real estate transaction that were recorded by the town clerk's office. These include deeds, mortgages, liens, and maps, among other things. Historians like to know where buildings once stood in times gone by; who lived where and how much anyone may have paid for a home or business. If a search does not involve records that are very old, data can be obtained by searching the land records database online. Land evidence records prior to 1871 (except maps) are not available to view or purchase online. For the years 1871 through 1908, only index data can be found online. Once index data is provided, staff members at the clerk's office can locate the needed document and produce copies for the requestor. Recorded land records from 1909 to the present are viewable online in addition to their index listings. Maps are available as shown in the table below.

Document	Dates	Availability
Land Evidence	1871-1908	Index Data
	1909-Present	Index Data and Images
Maps	1800-Present	Index Data and Images

(Continued on Page 7)

# The Town Clerk's Vault

(Continued from Page 6)

If all this sounds a bit confusing, parties can consult the Town of Westerly's website for information and clarification. Answers to questions about vital records, land records, and just about anything else that comes under the purview of the town clerk can be found at

<https://westerlyri.gov/643/Town-Clerk>.

Within the Westerly Town Clerk's office a comfortable research area exists for use by the public. Professional genealogists, persons performing title searches, and other trusted visitors may use the research area without continuous staff supervision. Several computer terminals are available for data lookups and can be used anonymously. That is, by searching from within the clerk's office, a user name and personal password are not needed.

Shown at right is an image of Book #1 of the land evidence indices for the Town of Westerly. The current system for indexing land evidence records in Westerly uses the year of the transaction as the book number. If a deed were recorded in 2016, for example, it would be found in Book Number 2016.

Many locals are aware that one book of Westerly land records has been lost without a trace for years. Town Clerk Donna Giordano seemed to recall that the book is number 84. As the story goes, it was lent to a trustworthy individual, and never made its way back to the town hall. Perhaps too much time had elapsed before anyone realized that the book was missing. People pass away, items are discarded, buildings may burn or be destroyed by floods. And so no one really knows what may have happened to Westerly's missing book.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this piece, the oldest records in Westerly are etched in fountain ink and written in a kind of language that disappeared centuries ago. Some of these documents have been carefully preserved in special clear page-holders due to their historical value and fragility. The photo shown

below is one of the oldest in the town clerk's vault. It appears to be a record of an official town meeting held in July of 1694. Most of the content is quite unintelligible, and the handwriting is not characterized by an abundance of flourishes as in other old papers. It begins, "Tobias Saunders chosen Moderator. Joseph Clark chosen Towne Clerk..." with the remaining names being well known to many Westerly historians: Hoxsie, Crandall, and Hall among others. The question arises, then, as to how a historian can decode or "decipher" what is written on a page such as this. We know that some famous deeds, such as the one concerning the first Misquamicut purchase, have already been transcribed. But when it comes to the more obscure records, the requestor is basically on their own. The staff at the town hall can help researchers with almost any request, but when it comes to transcriptions, the requestor, unfortunately is on their own.

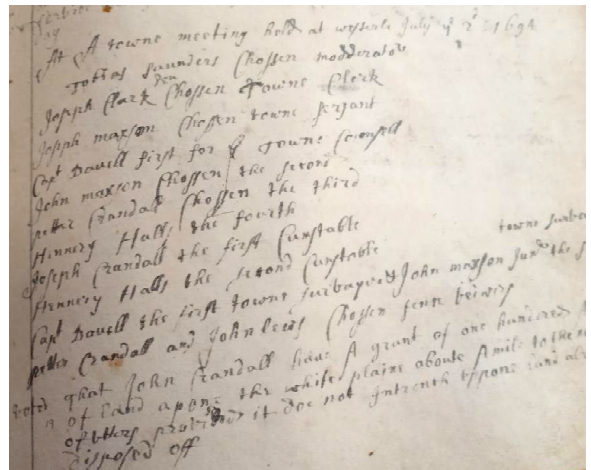


PHOTO: ANN L. SMITH

The following statement appears on the web page for the Westerly Town Clerk's office.

The office of Town Clerk is the oldest in American history. It was created with the landing of the early settlers in America. On May 18, 1669, the first Town Meeting in Westerly was held and four officers were elected to carry on the business of the Town. Among them was the Town Clerk whose duty at that time was to record plots of land granted to the settlers.

*We would like to express our thanks and appreciation to Westerly Town Clerk Donna Giordano and her staff for the several hours of assistance given in order to make this article possible. To search another excellent source of genealogical records related to Westerly, RI visit <https://ldsgenealogy.com/RI/Westerly.htm>.*



**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: The Haversham Inn**  
**336 Post Road, Westerly RI 02891**

This year's dinner will consist of a buffet featuring beef sirloin tips, chicken francese, pasta marinara and seasonal vegetables. Assorted pastry, coffee, and tea are included.

Please send me \_\_\_\_ tickets for the Westerly Historical Society Annual Meeting and Reception on May 25, 2022 @ \$35\* each.

Enclosed please find my check for \$\_\_\_\_\_

Name(s)\_\_\_\_\_

Address\_\_\_\_\_

City\_\_\_\_\_

State and Postal Code\_\_\_\_\_

*\*Ticket price has been subsidized in part this year following a decision by the WHS Executive Board.*

**Cocktails at 5:30 PM (Cash Bar)**  
**Dinner will be served at 6:00 PM**

Send this form with your check or money order before **May 18th** to:

**Westerly Historical Society**  
**P.O. 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.

Major credit cards and PayPal® accepted.