



Westerly's Witness

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September 2024

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Program Notes

THANK YOU

The Westerly Historical Society would like to extend our appreciation to all who attended the special joint summer program with the Watch Hill Conservancy. The program was on Fort Mansfield and was presented by Captain Jack Spratt.

SEPTEMBER PRESENTATION

Please join us as we premiere the first few trailers of our new "Reflections Program" and introduce the Westerly residents who have stepped up to record their memories for future generations. The presentation will be held on September 11th at 6 PM in the Carriage House of the Babcock-Smith House located at 124 Granite Street.

OCTOBER PRESENTATION

James Wolfe, a military veteran, genealogist, and genetic research analyst will discuss his discovery and his subsequent efforts to remember and to memorialize the lost souls of 172 people buried in the "Old Town Plot" section at the Riverbend Cemetery. The presentation will be held on October 9th at 6 PM in the Carriage House of the Babcock-Smith House located at 124 Granite Street.

SEEKING SPEAKERS AND WRITERS

We are still seeking speakers to present programs for the society as well as to write articles for our newsletters. If you know anyone who is familiar with a local history topic and enjoys talking or writing about their passion, please let us know.

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WESTERLY'S WITNESS

the Westerly Historical Society
P. O. Box 91, Westerly, RI 02891, nine times per
year in January, February, March, April, May, June,
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.

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President's Corner

Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

Hello WHS members and welcome back to our Fall season! I have missed you! Your society board is well rested and is ready to offer you all a new season of programs, events and newsletters. After a wonderful gathering for our annual dinner in May, we enjoyed an amazing program on History of Fort Mansfield by our friend and staunch supporter Capt. Jack Spratt in July. Our dear friends from the Watch Hill Conservancy were the perfect hosts as we debuted our Reflections program and gathered episode sponsorships.

Regarding Reflections, we have completed editing several episodes and I am very impressed with the product we have put together for you and for anyone interested in learning from the folks that are the fabric of our community as they share their life stories from birth to present, shedding light on the quality of life in our special town. They recall the trials and tribulations of their youth including finding spouses, raising families, making careers, and enduring the effects of world events.

Please look for an upcoming program, an evening reception with the beautiful folks that have stepped up to offer their Reflections such as Ed Liguori, Barbara Unkuri, Lois Vars, David Rathbun, as well as John and Mary Stellitano. They have gotten us off to an amazing start. All assembled and edited by our own Videographer, Greg Pettys.

I have been asked to give a historical talk on our amazing town at a luncheon on September 7th at The Haversham sponsored by Marty Podskoch and the Rhode Island 39 Club. I hope you can join us at the luncheon. Learn more about the RI 39 Club and look for details and tickets on the RI 39 Club website.

We continue to seek out Westerly antiques and ephemera to grow our archives with the hope that we will one day have a place to showcase it all to you.

Looking forward to seeing you all soon. Be well! Tom

EDITOR'S NOTES

Robert Peacock

***Thank you for continuing to patronize our
generous newsletter sponsors.***

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*We encourage our members to support these generous
Westerly businesses who continue to support our efforts
to bring you this newsletter. We appreciate their support!*

The article and photos of Fort Mansfield found in this newsletter are complements of a recent discovery in our archives of a small booklet written in 1984 by Clement A. Griscom. The booklet describes the planning, development, and ultimate failure of Fort Mansfield and includes several government photos including the eighteen wooden buildings that were built on Napatree Point starting in 1907 to support the soldiers living and working at the Fort.

***The booklet was discovered in a binder of unrelated
material that was donated by Dwight C. Brown.***

“The Rise and Fall of Fort Mansfield”

By Robert Peacock

Fort Mansfield was named after Joseph King Fenno Mansfield, who was born in 1803 and joined the military in 1817 as a cadet. He served as Chief Engineer of the Army during the Mexican War and then as Colonel and Inspector General. Following the outbreak of the Civil War, he was commissioned as a Brigadier General and assigned to provide protection to the Capitol and surrounding territory. After the Battle of Manassas, commonly referred to as Bull Run, the Army was reorganized and Mansfield was reassigned to command of the XII Corps. Two days after the reassignment, he was mortally wounded while reconnoitering enemy positions in preparation for the Battle at Antietam.

Fort Mansfield began with the government acquisition of two parcels of land on Napatree Point consisting of just over 98 acres from Henry B. Gorham for \$5,650. The transaction was completed on June 27th of 1898.

By July of 1899, construction was underway to build the three concrete bunkers. Reports indicate that barbed wire fences were placed across the point approximately halfway between Watch Hill and the location of the bunkers. Initially, all construction supplies were brought in by boat and landed via a one hundred and ninety-five foot dock on the West side of Napatree Point near the “elbow” where, prior to the Hurricane of 1938, the point turned towards the North.

By December of 1900, the construction of the concrete bunkers had been completed and the guns had been installed. In August of 1901, construction began on the eighteen wooden support buildings and a wagon road to Watch Hill was completed in the same year.

The Fort was first manned in 1901 following completion of the gun batteries by a detachment of 30 soldiers transferred from Fort Trumbull in New London including 2 Sergeants, 4 Corporals, and 24 Privates. Initially operating as a sub post of Fort Trumbull, the 88th Coast Artillery Company was created in April of 1901 and by October 1902, Fort Mansfield had been designated as an independent post.

By August of 1902, with the completion of many of the wooden support buildings, the Fort was manned by 228 military personnel in preparation for the planned summer war games and tests. Between 1903 and 1910, the Fort staffing varied between 80 and 120 soldiers.

The armaments included three separate gun batteries. Battery Wooster consisted of a set of eight-inch barrel rifles on limited firing disappearing mounts. Battery Crawford consisted of a set of five-inch barrel rifles on balanced pillar mounts. Battery Connell consisted of a set of five-inch barrel rifles on petticoat mounts.

On March 19th of 1902, Acting Secretary of War William Carey Sanger announced that by direction of the President of the United States, the gun batteries would be named in honor of fallen Army personnel.

The eight-inch gun battery was named Battery Wooster in honor of Brigadier General David Wooster of Connecticut who served in the Army and died on May 2nd of 1877 of wounds received in the Battle of Ridgefield Connecticut.

The Western five-inch gun battery was named Battery Crawford in honor of Captain Emmett Crawford who served in the Army and died on January 18th of 1886 of wounds received while pursuing hostile Indians near Nacori in Mexico.

The Eastern five-inch gun battery was named Battery Connell in honor of Captain James W. Connell who served in the Army and was killed in the Massacre of Balangia Island in the Phillipines on September 8th of 1901.

In July of 1907, a series of war games revealed a fatal flaw in the defenses of Fort Mansfield. It was determined that ships approaching Watch Hill Point from the direction of Block Island could remain safely out of range of the gun batteries by simply rounding the point and travelling close to shore along Napatree. This would allow the ships to safely pass by the Fort in a position that was effectively too far for small arms fire and too close for the angles of the gun batteries.

As a result, the decision was made to enhance the fortifications on Fishers Island and use Mansfield as a practice fort before closing it permanently.

In January of 1911, 100 soldiers were transferred out leaving only 17 soldiers to man the Fort. In April of the same year, another 9 were transferred leaving only 8. This staffing level dropped even further in 1916 to just 6 soldiers and remained at that level until the Fort was officially disbanded and then sold at auction on June 23rd of 1926.

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Announcements

REFLECTIONS PROGRAM

The Westerly Historical Society has begun the process of video interviewing the first of 24 Westerly residents to be part of our new oral history program called "Reflections".

"Reflections" will be a series of 24 videotaped oral histories featuring Westerly residents that are 80 years of age or older. They will be discussing their experiences and their memories of growing up and living in Westerly.

You can support this exciting new program by mailing a donation labeled "Reflections Program" to The Westerly Historical Society PO Box 91 Westerly RI 02891. Business and Individual Sponsorships of a full episode are also available. Please contact our President, Tom Gulluscio, at WHSPresident@gmail.com for more information.

BABCOCK SMITH HOUSE MUSEUM

We would like to take a moment to recognize our partners with the Babcock-Smith House Museum for their continued support and partnership. We have enjoyed a mutually supportive relationship for the past one hundred and ten years from the day that our society was literally conceived and developed by Julia Smith, the daughter of Orlando Smith, after she invited a group of history loving people to meet in her parlor at the Babcock-Smith House in 1913. We sincerely value and appreciate their guidance and support over the past century.



**WE SINCERELY APPRECIATE
THEIR CONTINUED SUPPORT!**

From Our Archives

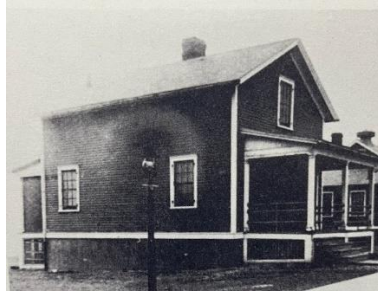
The following historical artifact was donated to further expand the historical collections of the Westerly Historical Society. As always, we sincerely appreciate all donations!

A Book Describing the History of Fort Mansfield

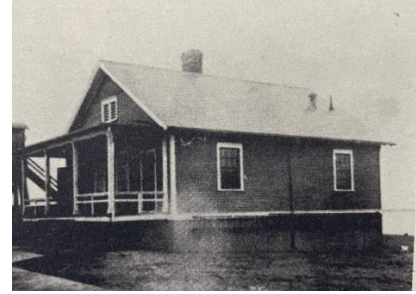
In our archives is a detailed history book written in 1984 by Clement A. Griscom which describes in detail the planning, development, and ultimate failure of Fort Mansfield located on Napatree Point. Included in the book are photos of the 18 wooden buildings that were built around between 1902 and 1907 to support the soldiers living and working at the Fort with responsibility for maintaining and manning the gun batteries. These photos show the variety of buildings located on the ninety-eight acres owned by the United States government.



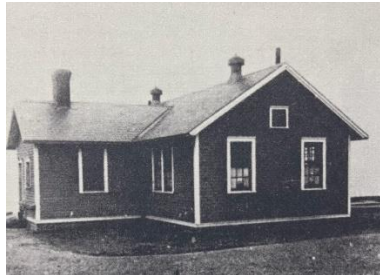
Base Hospital, 2729 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$8,858



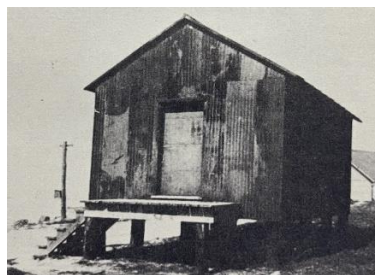
Medical Quarters, 807 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$2,750



Guard House, 948 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$3,438



Lavatory, 959 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$5,133



Oil House, 260 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$470



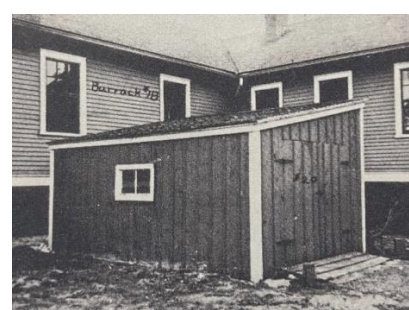
Officers Bath, 209 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$479



Enlisted Bath, 299 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$272



Artillery Barracks, 9,537 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$19,045



Fire Hose Cart Shed, 150 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$154

In addition to the wooden support buildings and concrete gun batteries, the booklet documents the construction of 1,359 feet of 15 foot wide concrete road, 7,092 feet of 15 foot wide macadam road, 605 feet of 12 foot wide cinder and shell road, 4,600 feet of concrete walkways, 2,490 feet of sewer pipe, and a 195 foot wharf.

If you are interested in obtaining additional information or arranging for a donation of a locally related item to our collection, please email our President, Thomas Gulluscio, at whspresident@gmail.com or our Archivist, Zachary Garceau, at whsarchivist@gmail.com

Discovering Westerly Cemeteries

Westerly Cemetery # 025 – Captain Thomas Sisson Lot

By Robert Peacock

There were approximately thirty ancient burials in this cemetery which was approximately forty feet by forty feet. The cemetery now contains only a single inscribed headstone marker. The most recent known burial was in 1841 and the oldest known burial was in 1811.

Although records do not indicate all of the names and burial dates for the people interred here, the information documented by Frederic Denison in the 1860's and the information from the Rhode Island Cemeteries Database indicates that the remains of the following individuals were buried here: William Clark (Born in 1781 and died February 28 of 1811 at the age of 31), Captain Thomas Sisson (Born in 1758 and died October 2 of 1841 at the age of 84) and his wife Abigail Sisson (Born in 1757 and died April 13 of 1831 at the age of 74), Sanford Sisson and his wife Elizabeth Sisson, John Sisson and his wife Keturah Sisson, and Joseph Sisson.

Records indicate that many of the bodies were later excavated and reinterred at Riverbend Cemetery including Captain Thomas Sisson and his wife Abigail. They now share a monument at Riverbend with Mr. Libeus Sisson, who was the owner of the property in the 1860's and who died in 1882.

The cemetery is located approximately 375 feet Northwest of 118 Dunns Corners Road and 30 feet to the left of the access road to the Timber Creek Resort. In the 1860's, the cemetery was reportedly enclosed by a stone wall. However, it is now in an open grassy area with a few large trees. The cemetery is very well tended by the Timber Creek property owners.

There is only one remaining grave marker. The brownstone headstone is inscribed but it is difficult to decipher. It appears to read "In memory of William Clark 2d died Feb 28 1811 in the 31st year of his age"

The remaining fieldstone markers are not visible. They may have sunken completely into the ground or they may have been removed over the past few hundred years when the bodies were transferred to Riverbend. However, many of the old marker stones may be hiding just a few inches below the surface.

According to the 1878 book by Frederic Denison, "Westerly and Its Witnesses", the cemetery was recorded in 1860's with the notation: "This lies about twenty-five rods west of the crossroad between the Post Road and Doorville (*Note – Doorville is now named Bradford*) about twenty-five rods Northwest of the residence of Mr. Libbeus Sisson."

Denison further documented that "The inclosure contains two graves, namely Capt. Thomas Sisson, esq., died Oct 2 1841 in his 84th year. Abigail (wife of Thomas Sisson, Esq) , died April 13, 1831, age 74." Dennison also noted that "Outside of the inclosure, in the same meadow, are about twenty-five graves, one of which is inscribed William Clark 2d 1811."

For those using GPS, the cemetery is located at 41 Degrees, 22 minutes, and 14.3 seconds North by 71 degrees, 46 minutes, and 02.9 seconds West. The cemetery is along the access road by the tennis courts.

In addition to a personal visit to the cemetery, information for this article was obtained from and sincere appreciation is extended to the research of Reverend Denison in the 1860's, the files of the Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries Commission, and the personal knowledge of Cemeteries Commissioner Larry Hunter.



In the 1860's, the cemetery was reportedly enclosed by a stone wall. However, it is now in an open grassy area with a few large trees. The cemetery site and the single headstone is very well tended by the Timber Creek property owners.



There is only one remaining visible grave marker. The headstone is inscribed but it is difficult to decipher. It appears to read “In memory of William Clark 2d died Feb 28 1811 in the 31st year of his age”



Records indicate that many of the bodies were later excavated and reinterred at Riverbend Cemetery including Captain Thomas Sisson and his wife Abigail. They now share a monument at Riverbend with Mr. Libeus Sisson, who was the owner of the property in the 1860's.



The cemetery is located approximately 375 feet Northwest of 118 Dunns Corners Road and 30 feet to the left of Sawmill Road (the access road to the Timber Creek Resort). In the 1860's, the cemetery was reportedly enclosed by a stone wall. However, it is now in an open grassy area beneath a few large trees.

(The location is within the area double circled in the upper left, beneath the trees)

Remembering One Hundred and Seventy Two Lost Souls

By Robert Peacock

The Westerly Historical Society offers our sincere thanks and appreciation to a quiet hero who literally saved the history of 172 Lost Souls and led the charge to permanently recognize and remember them!

While searching for a particular person's grave at River Bend Cemetery in May of 2023, James Wolfe was informed by Superintendent Greg Howard that the person had been interred in an area called the "Old Town Plot," and therefore locating their exact location would not be possible. Mr. Howard explained that the "Old Town Plot" is a large, mostly unmarked area of the cemetery, owned by the Town of Westerly, and located to the north of the brown maintenance building. Located between Cedar Avenue, Main Avenue, and Beach Avenue, the plot is approximately 100 feet long and 60 feet wide, with two L-shaped walls and seven vertical granite pillars along the walls, that were originally used by cemetery visitors to tie up their horses. The plot is part of Section #56 and is a wide-open grassy area with only four existing grave markers. Interments that occurred on this plot were always placed in the next available grave, and their exact locations were not catalogued as they would be on cemetery-owned land. This peaked Mr. Wolfe's curiosity, so he asked a few more questions, including if there was any available list of the other people that had been interred there. Superintendent Howard informed him that the Town Plot, by this point in time, was full to capacity and had been inactive for many, many years so it was going to take some time and additional digging on his part to locate and provide the information.



The markers represent Frederick J. Dunscomb, a soldier in the War of 1812, Born in 1792 and passed in 1880, George C. Willard, Born in 1881 and passed in 1944, Frances Kellerman, Born in 1938 and passed in 1968, and Agnes C. Boozam, Born in 1924 and passed in 1967. All of the other graves are unmarked.



All photos are courtesy of James Wolfe and were posted on the 'Find A Grave' Website.

Remembering One Hundred and Seventy Two Lost Souls

By Robert Peacock

James discovered that the plot was purchased by the Town of Westerly on May 15th of 1860 for 250 dollars. That sum would equate to approximately 9,450 in current dollars. It appears that the plot was primarily purchased to bury infants, still born babies, unknown people, and indigent people.

When James sought out to identify the other people on the plot, his search for town and cemetery records was initially unsuccessful. However, as a diligent investigator with a passion for discovering the history of people, James persisted with his research, even going to the extent of contacting a retired cemetery employee looking for any information that may be helpful. Eventually, the hard work of Mr. Wolfe and River Bend Cemetery staff paid off when a file was uncovered a couple of weeks later by Superintendent Howard which contained the list of the names and/or descriptions of each of the 172 people interred there.

The file identified 172 people who had been buried in the “Old Town Plot”. With the exception of four, all of the bodies were buried in unmarked graves. 161 are identified by name while 13 are sadly identified only by vague descriptors including “Unknown Man”, “Unknown Found At Beach”, “Drowned”, “Unknown Bones”, “Stranger”, and “Eight Bodies”. The body identified only as “Stranger” was buried on July 1st of 1878 and the bodies identified only as “Eight Bodies” were buried on October 29th of 1875.

There are twenty-six children, mostly identified as “Infant” or “Stillborn”. They included Infant Burdick who died on August 6th of 1935, Infant Reese who died April 2nd of 1932, and Infant Riley who died on January 17th of 1931. Sadly, the bodies also include Stillborn Dinwoodie who died on November 9th of 1933, Stillborn Winterbottom who died on June 25th of 1930, Stillborn Royster who died on April 30th of 1918, and Stillborn Hathaway who died on May 28th of 1913. May they all rest in peace!

James diligently worked to add all of the names and dates to the “FIND A GRAVE” website database and then sought to better memorialize and remember these previously forgotten and lost souls.

After consulting with Buzzi Memorial, James obtained a quote of \$14,825.50 to place a Memorial stone made of black granite with both front and back polished surfaces, inscribed headings of “Westerly’s Old Town Plot - Established 1860”, 172 sandblasted names in 5/8 inch letters, a rough edge along the top and sides, and room for additional names. The monument would be approximately three feet tall, five feet long, and eight inches thick. It would weigh approximately two thousand pounds and rest on a matching base which would be approximately six and a half feet long by approximately fourteen inches wide by approximately 8 inches high. The base would weigh approximately one thousand pounds.

James had a vision of raising funds to purchase and install an inscribed granite monument within the plot to memorialize and remember “these souls, who were once only known to God, and display it near the Old Town Plot in an effort to pay tribute to each of them with the kind of respect they deserve.”

In March of 2024, James met with Superintendent Howard to seek permission to place a monument at the site that would properly recognize the people interred on the plot. Mr. Howard stated that he thought it was a great idea, and the request was then forwarded to President Phil Friend and the rest of the River Bend Cemetery Board of Trustees. The request was subsequently approved by the cemetery's Board, pending approval from the town, at the River Bend Cemetery's Quarterly Trustees' Meeting in May.

James then approached the Town of Westerly to secure funding for a Memorial and found heavy support among town staff to fund the project. The Town Manager agreed to present the proposal to the Town Council and the funding was approved by unanimous vote in June of 2024. The Monument engraving is in process and is expected to be installed and unveiled in October.

The Westerly Historical Society sincerely applauds the efforts of James Wolfe, a quiet hero who literally saved the history of 172 Lost Souls and ensured they will be permanently recognized and remembered!

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