



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

October 2024

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Program Notes

OCTOBER PRESENTATION

James Wolfe, a military veteran, genealogist, and genetic research analyst will discuss his discovery and subsequent efforts to remember and to memorialize the lost souls of 172 people buried in the "Old Town Plot" at Riverbend Cemetery.

Please Join us for this free presentation on Wednesday, October 9th, at 6 PM at the Carriage House of the Babcock-Smith House located at 124 Granite Street.

REFLECTIONS VIDEO PROGRAM

The Westerly Historical Society continues to work on our new oral history program "Reflections" which will be a series of 24 videotaped and edited oral histories featuring Westerly residents that are 80 years of age or older. You can support this exciting new program by mailing a donation labeled as support for the "Reflections Program" to

Westerly Historical Society
Reflections Program
PO Box 91
Westerly, RI 02891

Please check the Westerly Historical Society Website or Facebook page to view the latest "Reflections" episodes!

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

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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.

CONTACT US

President *Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.*

WHSPresident@gmail.com

Vice President and Archivist *Zachary J. Garceau*

WHSArchivist@gmail.com

Secretary *Becky Jacoinski*

WHSSecretary@gmail.com

Treasurer *Robert Boucher*

WHS Treasurer@gmail.com

Membership *Cory Jacobson*

WHS Membership@gmail.com

Programs *Robert Peacock and Becky Jacoinski*

WHS Programs@gmail.com

Newsletter Editor *Robert Peacock*

WHS Newsletter Editor@gmail.com



Social Media *Jane C. Perkins*

Find us on Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/WesterlyHistoricalSociety/>

President's Corner

Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

Hello friends,

We have officially arrived in Fall! My favorite time of
year! We hosted a premier of Reflections this month. I
know you have heard an awful lot about this program
lately, but if you were with us for the premier you now
know why. It was truly amazing to be joined by the
generous folks who have given us their time and most
importantly have given us their life's stories! John and
Mary Stelltano, Betty Cugini, David Rathbun, Tippy
Salimeno, Ed Ligouri and Lois Vars attended to help
usher in the beginning of a remarkable project. The
forty plus attendees were glued to the screen while
samples of each story were shared. This has certainly
been an enlightening undertaking, and I'm thrilled to
help take it to completion of 24 scheduled episodes.

It's that time again for membership renewals, by the end
of this month you should expect your membership
renewal form in the mail. Please do not waste any time
filling it out and returning it to us here at the WHS so
you can enjoy your member benefits uninterrupted. We
count on memberships to sustain the operating budget
of the society and to support the many great programs
we deliver throughout the year as well as publications
and research assistance.

If you are a business owner or operate a corporation,
please consider supporting us with one of our two new
and exclusive membership levels.

I sincerely hope we can count on you for your continued
support!

Tom

EDITOR'S NOTES

Robert Peacock

In Memory of Barbara Unkuri

One of the first people to be interviewed for
our Reflections Program was Barbara Unkuri
who passed away shortly after filming her
story. Her inspiring story truly touched
everyone who has heard her tell it and her
family has expressed how much the video
has been a comfort in this difficult time.

We at the Westerly Historical Society are
honored to have been able to help Barbara
share her fascinating life story!

***Thank you to Greg Pettys and Jane Perkins
for contributing articles for this newsletter.***

***Thank you to our members for patronizing
our generous newsletter sponsors
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SERVPRO OF WASHINGTON COUNTY

MICHELLE'S SCHOOL OF DANCE

GREY SAIL BREWING

THE WINE STORE

ANNUAL REPORTS OF THE OPERATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES LIFESAVING SERVICE

By Jane Perkins

Four books published by the Government more than a century ago, in 1881, 1884, 1887, and 1889, and now owned by the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association, provide a unique historical perspective relative to the operations of the Watch Hill Life Saving Station. They document the costs and activities of the United States Life Saving Service and provide detailed accounts of significant incidents that the brave surfmen responded to from the Watch Hill Life Saving Station. The information found in these books includes the following details and accounts,

The United States Life Saving Service was divided into 12 districts in the 1880's. Each district was overseen by a superintendent, each station was managed by a keeper, and each station was staffed with six to nine surfmen assigned during the "active season", which varied based on location and climate.

In 1881, the Third District was made up of 14 Life Saving stations along the Rhode Island and Long Island Coasts. Five of the stations were in Rhode Island including the Narragansett Pier Station, the Point Judith Station, the Watch Hill Station, the New Shoreham Station (East Side of Island), and the Block Island Station (West Side of Island).

In 1881, the Superintendent of the Third District was paid an annual salary of \$1,500, the Station Keepers were paid an annual salary of \$400, and the Surfmen who were responsible for maintaining the lookouts, patrolling the beaches, and manning the life boats were paid an annual salary not to exceed \$480 which covered the eight months of the "active season" and was based on overall experience and years of service.

By 1884 there were 37 Life Saving Stations in the district, but no additional stations in Rhode Island. By 1889 there were 38 Life Saving stations in the district with the addition of the Brenton Point Life Saving Station in Rhode Island. Nationwide, there were 183 stations in 1881, 201 stations in 1884, 218 stations in 1887, and 225 stations in 1889.

Generally, the Third District stations operated from September 1st through April 30th with 6 to 8 surfmen on duty with the station keeper. During the "Inactive Season" the keeper maintained the building and mustered volunteers and part time surfmen as needed.

At the beginning of the decade, in 1881, there were 250 disasters involving 1,878 victims of which 1,854 were saved and 24 were lost. The estimated value of the vessels in danger was \$2,744,247 and the estimated value of the cargo in danger was \$1,310,505 totaling \$4,054,752 of property in peril. Of this total amount, more than half, \$2,282,680, was saved.

By the end of the decade, in 1889, there were 378 disasters involving 3,106 victims of which 3,068 were saved and 38 were lost. The estimated value of the vessels in danger was \$4,680,175 and the estimated value of the cargo in danger was \$1,663,705 totaling \$6,343,880 of property in peril. Of this total amount, more than three quarters, \$4,995,130, was saved.

Each book contains brief but detailed accounts of all significant rescues during the year throughout the nation. The following are two Watch Hill examples of the unique work often performed by the Surfmen.

1884 September 25. – During the southwest gale of this date the patrol of the Watch Hill Station (Third District), coast of Rhode Island, discovered a large lighter, or scow, stranded on Napatree Point, a mile and a half west of the station. On boarding the craft, she was found to be one of the vessels used by the parties constructing the Latimer Reef Lighthouse, Fisher's Island Sound, and had parted her moorings during the gale. The scow was completely wrecked and soon went to pieces. The station crew saved all the Government property on her and delivered it to the lighthouse authorities.

1881 June 7. – The schooner Sandalphon, of New York, bound from New York to Boston, having on board a crew of four men and four passengers, and a cargo of coal and furniture, stranded in an easterly wind and thick fog, on Catumbmb Reef, one mile and a half from shore and two miles and a half from Station No. 3, Third District, (Watch Hill, Rhode Island,) at 6:30 A.M., was discovered half an hour later, and at 8 A.M. the life-saving crew boarded her in the surf-boat. They hoisted her sails to keep her from rolling, ran out her anchor, manned the windlass, and with the assistance of the sails hove her off at 2 P.M. They then piloted her into Stonington harbor, furlled her sails, and left her in good condition.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Time to Renew Your Membership!

*We will be mailing the renewal information
and return envelopes to all current members.*

Membership Renewal Levels

Individual	\$25.00	
Family	\$50.00	
Patron	\$100.00	
Benefactor	\$250.00+	Samuel Ward Level
Corporate	\$500.00+	Silas Greenman Level

Dear Members,

October is Westerly Historical Society renewal month. Membership is our primary source of income. With your support we continue our mission to research, study, and preserve the local history in our community. We do this with programs, contests and awards as well as by supporting researchers, students and businesses looking to learn more about our town's storied history.

As always, we continue to encourage our membership to patronize our sponsors while shopping and to please support those who support us.

If you represent a local business or corporation in our area, please consider our new corporate membership level and we will do our part to let everyone know you are our champions!

Please look for your renewal forms in the mail and please remember that memberships make nice gifts to friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers!

Thank you for your continued support of the Westerly Historical Society!

Sincerely, Tom

**If you do not receive a renewal invitation, you may
renew online at www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org.**

**Or you may renew by mail by simply mailing a check
payable to Westerly Historical Society to the
following address; PO Box 91, Westerly, RI 02891.**

**Please include your name, mailing address, email
address, and phone number.**

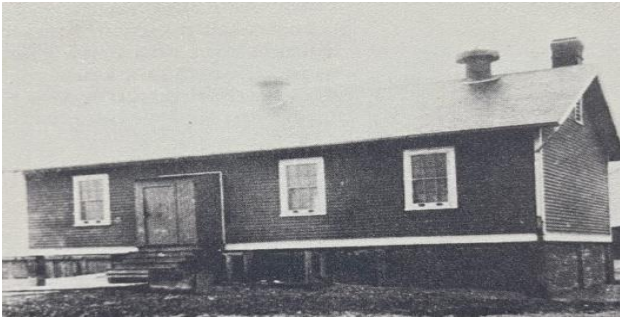
From Our Archives

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

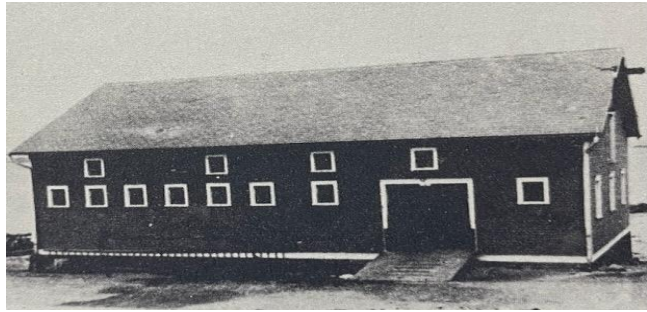
OUR READERS REQUESTED ADDITIONAL PHOTOS!

Last month we posted several photos from a book in our archives written in 1984 by Clement A. Griscom about Fort Mansfield on Napatree Point. Included in the book are photos of the 18 wooden buildings built around 1902 to support the soldiers living and working at fort with responsibility for manning the three gun batteries.

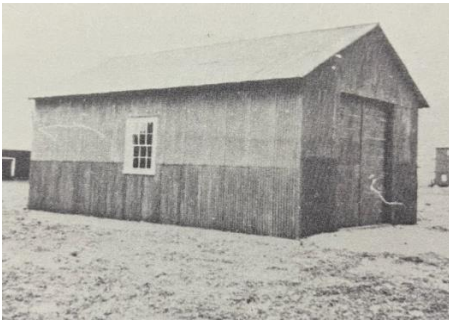
Several of our newsletter readers asked to see additional photos which are happily shared below!



Bake House, 464 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$2,523
Brick Foundation / Slate Roof



Stables, 3624 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$3,300
8 Stalls, 5 Rooms, Slate Roof



Truck Garage, 459 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$845
Housed Search Light Truck



Post Exchange, 3,226 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$9,322
Bowling Alley and Market



Officers Quarters, 3,528 Sq Ft
Construction Cost \$10,210
16 Rooms, 2 Officers Per Room



View from water's edge looking Northeast



View from the gun batteries looking Southeast

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 # 021 – James Peckham Cemetery

By Robert Peacock

There were reportedly fourteen burials in this cemetery which is approximately forty feet by sixty-five feet and contains three fieldstone grave markers and eleven inscribed headstone markers. The most recent burial was in 1885 and the oldest burial was in 1844.

Although records do not indicate the burial dates for all of the people interred here, the records of the Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries Commission indicates that the cemetery contains the remains of James and Charlotte Peckham and their daughter Nancy, Charles and Mary Peckham and their sons George and Orrin, Robert and Martha Peckham and their son Henry, and Daniel and Margaret Peckham.

The cemetery also contains the remains of Sadie Bentley, daughter of George and Emma Bentley, who was born on March 24th of 1885 and sadly died four months later on July 22nd of 1885.

While the average age of death of the Peckham family adults buried in this cemetery was 55 years old, the average age of death of their children was only 10 years old. George died at age 2, Henry died at age 9, and Orrin died at age 20.

The cemetery is located approximately fifteen feet off the road in front of 184 Church Street in Bradford. It is enclosed by an old stone wall with an entrance consisting of two granite posts which once held an iron gate. The cemetery is overgrown with vegetation and there are numerous visible inscribed grave markers. The three fieldstone markers are no longer visible. They may have sunken 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 in the northeast portion of town on the road leading into Charlestown on the east side of the road on the farm of the heirs of Daniel J. Peckham."

A bit of a mystery surrounds this cemetery. The neighboring property owners report that a man came to them a few decades ago asking to place a marker in memory of his sister. He returned several months later with a carved granite headstone marked "Rose Margaret DeFanti Infant daughter of John and Margaret 1928". There appears to be no record of her burial in this cemetery. Perhaps one of our readers has more information.

Our research leads us to believe that the man may possibly have been John A. "Dootsie" DeFanti, who died in 2010 at the age of 81. Born in Bradford, he was a son of the late John and Margaret DeFanti who are buried in Saint Sebastian cemetery in Westerly. Although his obituary indicates he was predeceased by three brothers and does not mention a sister, his birth date was August 7th of 1928 and the death date on the memorial stone for the "Infant Daughter" was also 1928. We have not been able to corroborate this connection and wonder if our readers may have any additional information or insight.

For those using GPS, the cemetery is located at 41 Degrees, 23 minutes, and 31.2 seconds North by 71 degrees, 44 minutes, and 06.1 seconds West.

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, the personal knowledge of Cemeteries Commissioner Larry Hunter, and the personal knowledge of local residents and cemetery neighbors Harold and Delores Teague.



The cemetery is located approximately fifteen feet off the road in front of 184 Church Street in Bradford. It is enclosed by an old stone wall with an entrance consisting of two granite posts which once held an iron gate. The cemetery is overgrown with vegetation and there are numerous visible inscribed grave markers.

The three fieldstone markers are not visible. They may have sunken completely into the ground and may be hiding just a few inches below the surface.



The cemetery also contains the remains of Sadie Bentley, daughter of George and Emma Bentley, who was born on March 24th of 1885 and sadly died four months later on July 22nd of 1885.



A bit of a mystery surrounds this cemetery. The neighboring property owners report that a man came to visit the cemetery a few decades ago and asked for permission to place a grave marker in memory of his sister. He returned several months later with a carved granite headstone marked “Rose Margaret DeFanti infant daughter of John and Margaret 1928”. However, there appears to be no official record of her burial in this cemetery.

The man may possibly have been John A. "Dootsie" DeFanti, who died in 2010 at the age of 81. Born in Bradford, he was a son of the late John and Margaret DeFanti who are buried in Saint Sebastian cemetery in Westerly. Although his obituary indicates he was predeceased by only three brothers and does not mention a sister, his birth date was August 7th of 1928 and the date on the memorial stone for the infant was also 1928.

We have not been able to verify or corroborate this presumption of a connection and we humbly wonder if any of our readers have any further insight or information?

Reflections – Life Stories of the People of Westerly in Their Own Words

By Greg Pettys

The idea for a series of video oral histories about the life stories of the people of Westerly came from a magazine story I wrote. The story, *Last of the Greatest Generation*, was about then 90-year-old Gordon Napier. Gordon served on the submarine, *USS Devilfish* during World War II.

The *Devilfish* has the distinction of being the only US submarine attacked by a Japanese Kamikaze aircraft during the war. Gordon passed away at age 96 and the audio recordings and photographs of his life are all that are left to tell his amazing story.

After reading Gordon's story in a local magazine, many people came forward with suggestions of other individuals who should have their life stories told. These senior Westerly residents all lived during the major historical changes that occurred over the last century including the Great Depression and WWII.

The people of Westerly are what make our town a special place with a history that is representative of many small towns across America. Our country was built by immigrants, some fleeing persecution, others seeking opportunity and like our country, Westerly had several waves of immigration from different cultures. People came here to work in the mills and the quarries; how they built our society is an important part of Westerly's story and the American story.

After Gordon and his wife Jean passed away, I realized that unless the stories of many seniors in Westerly were recorded; their history, memories, thoughts, hopes and desires would soon be lost to future generations. To document and preserve the life stories of the people of Westerly in their own words, the *Reflections* oral history project was developed by the Westerly Historical Society.

Each *Reflections* oral history program includes archival photographs, newspaper articles and family photographs corresponding to the period giving the audience an understanding of what life was like in Westerly at that time.

A fund-raising campaign was started by the Westerly Historical Society with the goal was producing twenty-four *Reflections* oral history programs. The program is now almost fully funded by our generous sponsors including The Rhode Island Foundation, Chelsea Groton Bank, Westerly Credit Union, and viewers like you.

Twenty-four people are in the process of being selected to represent a cross section of the people of the town. To date, five episodes of *Reflections* are currently on the Westerly Historical Society's website and can be viewed at <https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/reflections/>

Additional *Reflections* oral histories have been recorded and are presently in post-production. Westerly writer and videographer Gregory Pettys is producing the project with Westerly Historical Society President Thomas Gulluscio, Jr. and Vice President and Archivist Zachary J. Garceau.

With the recent passing of Barbara Unkuri, the second participant in the Reflections Program, the emotional aspect of these stories has become very apparent. Her inspiring story has touched everyone who has heard her tell it and her family has expressed how important her video is to them with her passing. I am honored, with the help of the Westerly Historical Society, to have been able to help her share her story.

Reflections – Life Stories of the People of Westerly in Their Own Words

By Greg Pettys



This photo was taken following the interview with “Coach” Steilitano at the Westerly VFW Post 8955. Pictured from left to right standing are Larry Hirsh, Greg Pettys, Kathy Steilitano Ladd, Scott Fricke (Vice Commander of VFW Post 8955), and Tom Gulluscio. Seated are Mr. and Mrs. Steilitano.

The Westerly Historical Society continues to work on our new oral history program “Reflections” which will be a series of 24 videotaped and edited histories featuring Westerly residents that are 80 years of age or older.



Gregory Pettys, Producer of the Reflections is on the top left and Thomas Gulluscio, President of the Westerly Historical Society, is on the top right, with 6 of the 10 people whose life stories have already been recorded and are being told in the Reflections program.

From left to right in the top row, David Rathbun and Betty Cugini. From left to right in bottom row, Lois Vars, Mary Stellitano, Doctor John (Coach) Stellitano, and Doctor Thomas (Tippy) Salimeno

Other participants include Joe and Carol Potter, Edward Liguori, and the late Barbara Unkuri.

Photo Credit; Kathy Stellitano Ladd

The Westerly Historical Society held a reception on September 11th at the Babcock-Smith House Museum Carriage House to honor the first ten participants in its video oral history project entitled Reflections. Reflections was developed to document and preserve the life stories of the people of Westerly told in their own words. All of the Reflections programs can be viewed on the Westerly Historical Society website at: <https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/reflections/>

You can support this exciting new program by mailing a donation labeled as “Support for the Reflections Program” to

Westerly Historical Society PO Box 91 Westerly, RI 02891

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