



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

November 2024

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Program Notes

REFLECTIONS

The Westerly Historical Society continues to work on our new oral history program "Reflections" which is a series of 24 videotaped 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
PO Box 91 Westerly, RI 02891

PRESENTATION APPRECIATION

We extend a sincere thank you to James Wolfe for presenting the details of his discovery of unknown graves and his subsequent efforts to remember and memorialize the lost souls of 172 people buried in the "Old Town Plot" at Riverbend Cemetery. The presentation was very informative and was very well attended.

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.

VETERANS DAY REMEMBRANCE

Please take a few moments in November to recognize and to remember the sacrifices of each and every one of our Veterans.

While Memorial Day honors service members who died in service to their country, Veterans Day pays tribute to all American veterans, both living and dead, but especially to those living veterans who served their country honorably during both war and peacetime.

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WESTERLY'S WITNESS

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

President's Corner

Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

Hello friends,

I hope this finds you all well and settling into your Fall routine.

Please take a moment this month to recognize and show your appreciation for our veterans!

You will soon receive your annual renewal letter and membership envelope. Please fill out the information on the envelope and return to us as soon as possible.

The only way we can continue to conduct the great work that we do is made possible with your generous support through your membership.

Please keep an eye out for our upcoming programs and look for more episodes of Reflection's on our website and our Facebook page. We have recently added several new episodes for you to enjoy!

If you are so inclined to donate historical items to our collection or to financially support our Reflections program, please contact me!

In fact, if you have any questions at all about the Westerly Historical Society, please feel free to reach out. I would love to hear from you!

I can be reached at WHSPresident@gmail.com

I hope you enjoy the Holidays!

I look forward to seeing you in the New Year!

Stay well,

Tom

EDITOR'S NOTES

Robert Peacock

*Thank you to Ann Smith, Dave Smith,
Zachary Garceau, Jane Perkins, and Sue
Bray Reynolds for contributing articles for
this issue of the monthly newsletter.*

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HOLIDAY VACATION

As always, we will be taking a vacation and hiatus to enjoy the Holiday Season. We will not be publishing a full newsletter in December, but we will be back at the start of the New Year with a January issue.

We sincerely hope you enjoy and celebrate the end of the year with whatever personal traditions you prefer!

Happy Holidays!

“Veterans Day”

By Ann Smith

The following is adapted from an article written in 2014 by Ann Smith for the Newsletter.

November 11 is Veterans Day and each year we all try to pause from our shopping and leisure activities to give tribute to those who served in our armed forces.

For the baby-boomers of my generation, World War II and Korea are abstract realities. What we remember about Vietnam is the flag burnings, the protests at Kent State University and elsewhere, or maybe Country Joe and the Fish singing their war protest at Woodstock.

Folks born after us are even more estranged from the war stories of the veterans around us. Members of the younger set know only what they have seen in movies or taught in history class. Add to that the reluctance of our veterans to talk about themselves.

The fact is, most are humble and often the memories are painful. I recently picked up a copy of Veterans War Stories. This important work of military history was published by the Westerly Historical Society.

Veterans War Stories contains nearly 100 accounts of duty by brave men and women from Westerly and the surrounding area who served proudly and selflessly in our country’s conflicts.

The profiles are of people our readers know, have met, or perhaps are related to.

Many of the interviews conducted during the compilation of this book were done by Julia B. Kerr who died just before the work was published.

Dwight C. Brown, Jr., a board member of the Westerly Historical Society at the time, stepped up with others to contribute countless hours to allow Julia’s dream to become a reality.

The stories themselves are very poignant and up-front.

Frank Canastar speaks openly about drug use by our troops in Vietnam.

Lawrence Chick recounts the details of recovering stolen art treasures from the Germans in the salt mines at Merker.

Michael (Micky) Levcowich talks about D-Day on the shores of Normandy and the liberation of Paris in August of 1944.

Andrew S. Low, Jr. recounts how he was captured by the Germans and spent 273 days as a prisoner of war before being liberated in April 1945.

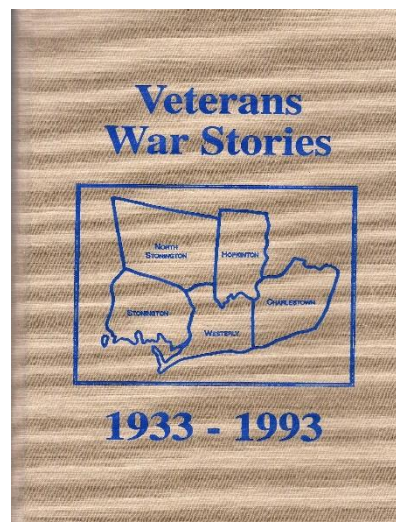
Anthony Leonetti’s story discusses his role in the evacuation of about 1,000 American Asian “orphans” out of Vietnam.

Anthony’s orphan story is particularly moving. The term “orphans” is used loosely here because many of the families willingly turned their children over to orphanages fearing the imminent arrival of the North Vietnamese. They claimed that the children’s parents had been killed when that may have not been the case. Some were days-old infants and others were older, up to about eight years of age.

Many of the humble men and women whose stories appear in Veterans War Stories have died since this book first appeared in 1997, but some are still around.

A great number suffered injuries and a few still have metal in their hips or shoulders to prove it.

We here at the Westerly Historical Society hope that you will spend some time this Veterans Day thinking of our local military men and women. Perhaps there is no better way to pay tribute to our veterans than reading their stories. The reader will be moved and the reader will be enlightened...guaranteed.



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Announcements

REMINDER

Time to Renew Your Membership!

We have mailed 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

October was 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!

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.

WE APPRECIATE YOUR 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!

This summer, we received a fantastic addition to our ever-growing collection. Sue Bray Reynolds of Westerly graciously donated a wooden medical chest that had once been owned by a local doctor named Edwin Ransome Lewis. In addition to the chest itself, Ms. Reynolds also donated her extensive research on the chest and its owner, Dr. Lewis. (Please see article on page 10 for her research)



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 # 063 – Dunham Ground

By Robert Peacock

There were reportedly twenty burials in this cemetery which is approximately forty feet by forty feet and contains a few barely visible fieldstone grave markers and no inscribed headstone markers. The most recent burial was prior to 1868 and the oldest burial is unknown.

Although records do not indicate the burial dates for any of the people interred here, the records of the Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries Commission and the research of Frederic Denison indicates that the cemetery contains the remains of a Mr. Perkins and his wife, a Mr. Peleg Sisson and his wife, Timothy Sisson, Abby Sisson (wife of Ichabod Sisson), Esther Dunham, Robert Dunham, Rosina Sisson, John Sisson and Rebecca Dunham.

The cemetery is located approximately two hundred feet off the road behind 150 East Avenue in Moore Woods. The cemetery is surrounded by large pine trees and is relatively clear of heavy vegetation. The thick layer of pine needles covering the ground prevents the overgrowth of vines and brush. Visiting is much easier in the late winter and late fall when the light vegetation is gone. There are a few potential fieldstone grave markers visible. However, many of the fieldstone markers are no longer visible and have sunken below ground level.

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 thirty rods east of the Back Road (leading from the post-road near the quarry to the Lottery Road, near Pawcatuck Rock), and about thirty rods northeast from the residence of Joshua Barber, near the corner of a pasture, and is uninclosed. Of the twenty graves none have inscribed stones”.

Denison further documented the known graves in his book by writing, “Here lie a Mr. Perkins and his wife, Mr. Peleg Sisson and his wife, Timothy Sisson, a Mr. Peleg Sisson and his wife, Timothy Sisson, Abby (wife of Ichabod Sisson), Esther Dunham, Robert Dunham, Rosina Sisson, John Sisson and Rebecca Dunham.”

Denison noted in his book that Peleg Sisson was a soldier with the Westerly Rifles Squad and served as a private in the Civil War. He is listed in the “Muster Roll of Captain Henry C. Card’s Company 1, in the First Regiment of Rhode Island Detached Militia, Commanded by Col. A.E Burnside.”

To find the graveyard, enter Moore Woods from the parking lot on East Avenue. Follow the rock wall on the right approximately 200 feet and then turn right to continue following the path approximately thirty feet from the wall for approximately another 200 feet. Look for the intersection of a wall leading from this wall off to the left. Go through the opening in the wall and look to your left. The Historic Cemetery Sign will be visible.

The paths and the surrounding areas are very well maintained by the Harriet Chappell Moore Foundation. While visiting the cemetery, be sure to walk around a bit and enjoy the beautiful scenery and awesome views. You will find it to be very relaxing!

For those using GPS, the cemetery is located at 41 Degrees, 21 minutes, and 13.8 seconds North by 71 degrees, 49 minutes, and 14.8 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 Hatsy Moore.



The cemetery is located approximately two hundred feet off the road behind 150 East Avenue in Moore Woods. The cemetery is surrounded by large pine trees and is relatively clear of vegetation. The thick layer of pine needles covering the ground prevents the overgrowth of vines and brush.

There are a few visible stones which possibly could be the tips of sunken fieldstone grave markers. However, most of the fieldstone markers are no longer visible and appear to have completely sunken below the surface and into the ground with the passage of time.

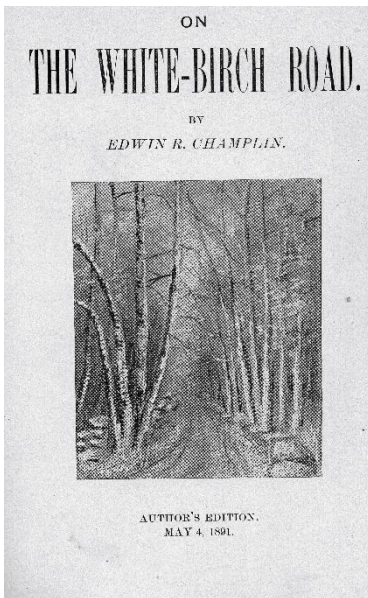
WOMEN AND THEIR RIGHT TO VOTE

By David Smith

Not everyone was in favor of giving the women to vote, but there was a Westerly native that saw it as the right thing to do.

That man was Edwin Ross Champlin, who was as well-known as his brother Dr. John Champlin or his clothing store owner father, Samuel and his brother George, heir to the clothing store. But what Edwin is remembered for, along with a long career as a journalist, was his poetry, and that support for suffrage.

His books were self-published and include: "Heart's Own Verses," 1886; "Lovers' Lyrics and Other Songs," 1888, and "On the White-Birch Road," 1891. They were probably not heralded at the time he published them, but the words remain.



His efforts could best be described as influenced by Victorian sensibilities. One of his poems was titled "The Music of My Love," from his 1891 book titled On The White-Birch Road.

***"When the chimer strikes the bells,
All the harmony that stirs
To his touch and soft recurs
It is drowned in the swells
Of the music in my heart
As I touch my hand to her,
And the chimes immortal start."***

Edwin was the son of Samuel Anthony Champlin and Mary Bliven. His parents married on May 16, 1853. He was the first born on May 4, 1854. He had three brothers, one of which died shortly after birth. They are: George Anthony, born Nov. 17, 1855; Samuel, born Sept. 8, 1861 and died Sept. 17, 1861, and John, born Oct. 5, 1863.

It should be noted that Samuel's parents were Benjamin and Ruth (Teft) Champlin. Edwin's father, Samuel, was born on July 28, 1822 in Exeter. His mother was the daughter of John Ross and Phoebe (Taylor) Bliven of Westerly.

Edwin's first job was as the night editor for the Norwich Morning Bulletin in 1872. He was 18 years old. He was later invited to be the Westerly correspondent by city editor Stiles Stanton of Stonington.

At age 20, he went to New York City, where he worked as a writer for the New York Tribune. Later he went to work for the Danbury News in Danbury, Conn., before returning to work at the Norwich Bulletin. Ever the traveler, he ended his journalism career at the Fall River News in Fall River, Mass., where he stayed for nearly 25 years.

Continued On Next Page

WOMEN AND THEIR RIGHT TO VOTE

By David Smith

Edwin married Georgie Augusta Butler on April 25, 1877. She was the daughter of George F. and Sarah S. (Mitchell) Butler. Edwin and Georgie had two sons, Charles Laurence Champlin and John Butler Champlin.

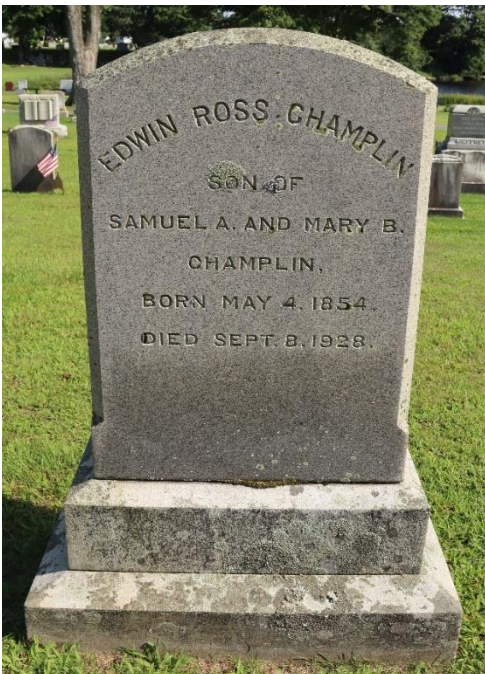
At the time of his wife's death on Oct. 11, 1927, the couple were residing in a modest home at 9 Cedar Avenue in Riverside, RI. After his wife's death, Edwin moved to Worcester, Massachusetts, where he died on Sept. 8, 1928, at the age of 74, about one year after his wife.

But the greatness of the man can also be judged by his actions. On April 21, 1913, a letter from him was printed in the Westerly Sun in support of the Suffrage Movement or giving women the right to vote. He was for equal representation and history proved him right.

It was an impassioned letter. He wrote, "When women shall vote throughout the United States (no matter how they vote) they will have "risen," and it will be impossible for women to rise without men (no matter how they vote) rising also."

He said that it was a subject that all men and women should show an interest. After hearing a suffrage speaker, he said, "It was clear to me, from her presentation of the case that justice required the immediate opening of the ballot box to all women who had reached their majority and who were of equal intelligence with the men to whom the ballot box was already open."

"I have never heard a single argument against the movement which has any foundation in justice; every plea is based on either pure masculine selfishness or foolish fear of degradation or over-burdening of women, or some theory of the perfect honesty and absolute trustworthiness of men," he said.



An obituary notice in The Westerly Sun on Sept. 9, 1928, notes he was stricken on the street, taken to the hospital, and died the same day. There were funeral services from his home at 2 Schussler Road, Worcester at 10 a.m., and then Prayers at the chapel at River Bend Cemetery in Westerly at 3:30 p.m.

He is buried next to his parents at River Bend.

Edwin's wife died at the age of 77 years and four days. The death certificate listed her occupation as housewife. The cause of death was listed as a cerebral hemorrhage and noted that she lingered for 13 days.

She is buried in Eastern Cemetery in Gorham, Maine, with her family.

Doctor Edwin Ransome Lewis

By Sue Bray Reynolds

This summer, the Westerly Historical Society received a fantastic addition to our ever-growing collection. Sue Bray Reynolds of Westerly graciously donated a wooden medical chest that had once been owned by a local doctor named Edwin Ransome Lewis.

The chest is 26.5 inches long by 8 inches wide and is composed of wood with a leather carrying strap and brass fasteners. The front of the chest contains a brass plaque that reads “E.R. Lewis M.D., Westerly, R.I., 1926.”

Interestingly, the inside of the chest has “1924” and “E.R.L.” carved in two locations, suggesting that perhaps the plaque was a later addition. There is also a twelve-inch ruler carved into the top of the interior wall. The chest is held on two transporting sleds making it easier to transport to medical appointments.

In addition to the chest, Ms. Reynolds also donated her research on the chest and its owner.

The following information was kindly provided through the research of Sue Bray Reynolds:

Dr. Edwin Ransome Lewis was born at 67 High Street in Westerly on 5 June 1863 to Dr. Edwin R. Lewis (1827-1887) and his wife, Louisa Brown Lewis. Early in his life, his family moved into a home at 95 High Street where he lived most of his life. This building was where the Ocean Community YMCA currently stands.

The younger Dr. Lewis was educated at schools in Westerly and Providence before he attended and graduated from Harvard Medical School as part of the Class of 1877. On 27 February 1889, Edwin married Mary Townsend Babcock, the daughter of Horace and Harriet B. Babcock.

Dr. Edwin Ransome Lewis’ service to the town of Westerly and the medical community cannot be overstated. He served in a variety of positions for myriad organizations throughout his life including: working as the acting assistant surgeon of the Third District for the U.S. Coast Guard, treating many members of the Coast Guard during the Influenza epidemic of 1918, serving as a member of the Westerly Town Council, serving on the Court of Honor for the Quequatuck District of Boy Scouts, acting as Vice President of Rhode Island Fish and Game Protective Association, working as a volunteer firefighter with the Westerly Fire Department, and working with the Westerly Sanitary Corps.

Dr. Lewis also made many important bequests and gifts to the community that he called home. His generosity funded the Edwin R. Lewis Charity Fund of the Westerly Elks Lodge and the Edwin R. Lewis, M.D., Memorial Fund at Westerly Hospital (named in honor of his father). Edwin Ransome Lewis died on 27 February 1931 and he is buried in River Bend Cemetery (Section 4, Lot 1253).

As his obituary concludes: “When his death came today the doctor was at his camp on the banks of the Pawcatuck River, near the Meeting House Bridge, a place he loved to go to bring him very close to nature and the birds and fish he loved so well.”

THE UNITED STATES LIFESAVING SERVICE

By Jane Perkins

Our readers enjoyed the first segment of this story in the October newsletter and asked for more details on the local wrecks from the 1880's. We appreciate the feedback and are happy to oblige!

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 Keppers Association, provide a unique historical perspective relative to the operations of the Watch Hill Life Saving Station. The following are a few more excerpts from the books that provide actual examples of the dangerous work performed by these brave Surfmen.

Please keep in mind as you read the accounts, the long distances that they were required to row their small boat in heavy seas and adverse weather conditions. Imagine rowing three miles to a wreck, working hard to assist, and then rowing three miles home. Amazingly, in December of 1883, the crew rowed almost 9 miles towards Long Island.

October 28, 1881 – The schooner J. W. Fish, of St. George, Maine, with a cargo of ice and crew of six men, stranded on Sugar Reef, three miles west of Watch Hill, Rhode Island, at half-past one in the morning. She was discovered by the patrolman of Station No. 3, Third District, (Rhode Island,) at daylight, and at about the same time by the lookout at the station. The surf-boat was immediately launched and manned, and started for the vessel, stopping by the way to take in the patrolman, who was returning to the station to report. The schooner was found on the reef, two miles from shore. In the afternoon the life-saving crew returned to the schooner and assisted at the pumps. The vessel was saved with only the loss of a part of her false-keel.

December 20, 1883 – The lookout of the Watch Hill Station (Third District), coast of Rhode Island, discovered a vessel stranded on Schooner Reef, on the south side of Fisher's Island, about nine miles southwest of the station. The life-saving crew proceeded with all speed in their life-boat to the vessel, and on boarding her found she was full of water. Shortly after the arrival of the life-boat, the United States revenue steamer Dexter and the tug Storm King came to the scene to assist.

September 23, 1887 – The lumber-laden schooner Vicksburgh, of and from Bangor, Maine, while on her way to New York through Vlock Island Sound, was struck by a violent southeast squall, and being unable to carry sail, the latter was taken in and the vessel put before the wind. The spindle on the east side of Lord's Channel was mistaken for the one that marks Watch Hill Reef, and at 7 o'clock in the morning she ran on Meeting House Shoal, about two miles and quarter west of the Watch Hill Station, (Third District,) coast of Rhode Island. The weather was thick and rainy at the time with a high sea running. The vessel was discovered by the west patrol, who hurried to the station with the tidings. As quickly as possible the surf-boat was launched, and after a hard pull against the wind and tide the life-saving crew arrived alongside. The surfmen at once joined the crew of five men, manned the pumps, and assisted to set the foresail. Her disabled condition and the fact that she could not be kept free with the pumps made it necessary for the station men to man the surf-boat and hasten to Stonington, a distance of three and a half miles, and engage a tug. On returning to the vessel, the surfmen assisted to get her underway and then pulled back for the station arriving after 3 o'clock.

November 25, 1887 – At forty minutes past 7 o'clock in the evening the west patrol of the Watch Hill Station, (Third District,) coast of Rhode Island, discovered a vessel close inshore heading directly for the beach. He quickly burned a Coston signal and then hastened to alarm the life-saving crew. A southeast gale of wind prevailed and the weather was thick and rainy. The craft struck the beach broadside on a short distance northeast of the station, and lay in a dangerous position, more than a hundred yards from the shore, with the heavy surf breaking over her. The beach apparatus was immediately manned and got in readiness, but owing to the almost impenetrable darkness, and to the fact that the furious onset of the waves, together with the motion of the vessel, made it next to impossible for the sailors to get around on deck and into the rigging, it was not until the sixth shot was fired that the line was finally secured on board. The gear was then speedily put in working order, and five of the crew were rescued in the breeches-buoy.

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