



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

February 2025

Westerly Historical Society Executive Board 2024-2025

President

Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

Vice President

Zachary J. Garceau

Secretary

Becky Jacoinski

Treasurer

Robert Boucher

Archivist

Zachary J. Garceau

Babcock-Smith House Museum Liaison

Edward A. Fazio

Membership Chair

Cory Jacobson

Newsletter

Robert Peacock

Programs

Robert Peacock

Becky Jacoinski

Web Master

Maria Bernier

Social Media

Jane C. Perkins

Videographer

Greg Pettys

Program Notes

BRADFORD FIRE HISTORY PROGRAM

Please join us for a short program discussing
"A Century of Fire Protection in Bradford".

Wednesday, February 12th, 6:30 PM

In The Carriage House of the
Babcock Smith House Museum
124 Granite Street
Westerly RI 02891

ALL ATTENDEES WILL RECEIVE A FREE GIFT!

REFLECTIONS

The Westerly Historical Society continues to work on our oral history program "Reflections" which is a series of videotaped histories featuring Westerly residents that are 80 years of age or older.

Please check our Website, YouTube Channel, or Facebook Page to view the latest 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.

TRIVIA QUESTION

Welcome to a new monthly feature recommended by the Westerly Historical Society Executive Board

The song by Taylor Swift titled "The Last Great American Dynasty" was based on the activities of which former Watch Hill resident? The answer is on the next page!

In this Issue

Program Notes	Page 1
Presidents Corner	Page 2
Editors Notes	Page 2
Wreck of the Steamship Onondaga	Page 3
Special Announcements	Page 4
From Our Archives	Page 5
Discovering Westerly's Cemeteries	Page 6
Discovering Westerly's Cemeteries	Page 7
Discovering Westerly's Cemeteries	Page 8
Discovering Westerly's Cemeteries	Page 9
The Pawcatuck River Bridge	Page 10
The Pawcatuck River Bridge.....	Page 11
Sponsor Recognition.....	Page 12



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.

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, Welcome to February's newsletter. Our
days our getting longer and let's hope a bit warmer.

We here at your society have been busy filling our
schedule for an exceptional 2025 season! I need to
start off by reminding those who have not yet renewed
your membership to please do so. I will be sending out
reminders for those in need within a week or so.

I am thrilled to report that the Babcock-Smith House
Museum board has loaned the Ike Smith local history
room to us for the complete year and our dedicated
archivist Zack Garceau has been preparing an exhibit
on local sport's history through the years. You can
visit the exhibit while the museum is open. Please
check out their schedule and enjoy!

I'm pleased to announce that our road show will once
again be presenting at the Watch Hill livery in July.
Our esteemed friend Captain Jack Spratt has offered to
present on another piece of Watch Hills rich history.
This year's topic is on the grand hotels of Watch Hill.
Please plan to join us and our friends this summer at
the Watch Hill Conservancy for this year's exciting
event! A date will be announced soon.

The WHS and BSHM will be accepting nomination
for our joint history award for 2025. Please look to
either of our websites for details.

Be well,

Tom

EDITOR'S NOTES

Robert Peacock

*Thank you to Zack Garceau and Jane
Perkins for contributing articles for this
month's newsletter!*

*As always, we welcome guest authors
to contribute articles to our newsletter!*

TRIVIA ANSWER – The song is based on the antics of
Rebekah Harkness, the heir to the Standard Oil Fortune,
who previously owned "Holiday House", the Watch Hill
mansion which is now owned by Taylor Swift.

*Thank you for patronizing our generous
newsletter commercial sponsors including:*

MICHELLE'S SCHOOL OF DANCE
THORP & TRAINER INSURANCE
WESTERLY DENTAL GROUP
GREY SAIL BREWING
THE WINE STORE
SERVPRO

We encourage you support these fine businesses!

The Wreck of the Steamship Freighter Ononodaga

By Jane Perkins

On June 27th of 1918, the Steamship Ononodaga left Boston Massachusetts in the afternoon bound for Jacksonville, Florida with scheduled stops in New York and Charlestown, South Carolina. She was under the command of Captain Willam H. Groggins and was operating as a cargo freighter carrying a load of general merchandise including perfume, dishes, cups, shoes, clothing, leather, tires, and other goods.

Built in 1905 in Philadelphia by the William Camp and Sons Company, she was owned by the Clyde Steamship Company which operated a fleet of cargo steamships based in New York that transported goods all along the East Coast. Each of the company ships were named after a Native American tribe. The ONONDAGA was named after the Onondaga Tribe which was from what is now Onondaga County in upper New York, just south of Lake Ontario. The name is said to mean "People of The Hills".

On June 28th around 9 PM, traveling in heavy fog, the captain and the lookouts apparently mistakenly identified the Watch Hill foghorn for the Race Rock foghorn. As the Captain adjusted course based on this assumed position, the ship struck the Watch Hill Reef. The ship turned sideways following the collision and then continued floating for a short distance before the crew realized the ship was rapidly taking on water. The captain ordered the crew to abandon the ship and the freighter sank in approximately fifty feet of water near an iron marker on the edge of the reef that is commonly called the "Spindle" by local mariners.

Surfmen from the United States Life Saving Station at Watch Hill responded to assist in the evacuation and all of the crew members were successfully taken to shore in Watch Hill. Several had minor injuries and the crew stayed the night in the life saving station.

The New York Times reported that "The Clyde Line freighter ONONDAGA, out of Boston for Charlestown and Jacksonville, lost her way in heavy fog off Watch Hill last night, struck a reef, and sank in shallow water after her crew of thirty-five had been taken off. Life savers from the Watch Hill station, responding to a call for help, succeeded in taking all hands to shore". The Westerly Sun ran a similar story with photos of the rescued crew and officers.

While the newspapers provided the basic information and details, they left out a few very pertinent and possibly causative details related to the ongoing war with Germany.

To paraphrase what Paul Harvey would often say, this is the "Rest of the Story".

What the newspapers did not report at the time, was that the ONONDAGA was travelling a relatively unfamiliar route very close to shore due to multiple reports of German U-Boat activity in the area and various recent U-Boat sightings along the coast. Normally, the ship would have taken a route far offshore from the coast in open, unobstructed water.

Even with the warnings, the freighter originally planned to follow a route that would take the ship on the outside of Block Island and Long Island.

However, as the ONONDAGA was travelling past Point Judith, a United States Coast Guard patrol boat hailed the captain and requested that he adjust course and travel on the inside of both islands and travel through Block Island Sound and Long Island Sound. This Coast Guard request was reportedly made due to the recent U-Boat activity and sightings off Block Island and Long Island.

Being unfamiliar with this route and with heavy fog rolling in, Captain Groggins requested if a local pilot familiar with this route was available to provide guidance and assistance to safely guide his ship along the new route. Unfortunately, he was told that none were available.

Using charts and compass bearings, and with multiple lookouts scanning for danger, Captain Groggins cautiously proceeded along the new route in heavy fog. Unfortunately, the unfamiliar route and the heavy fog contributed to the ship striking the Watch Hill Reef a few hours later and quickly beginning to sink as the crew abandoned the ship.

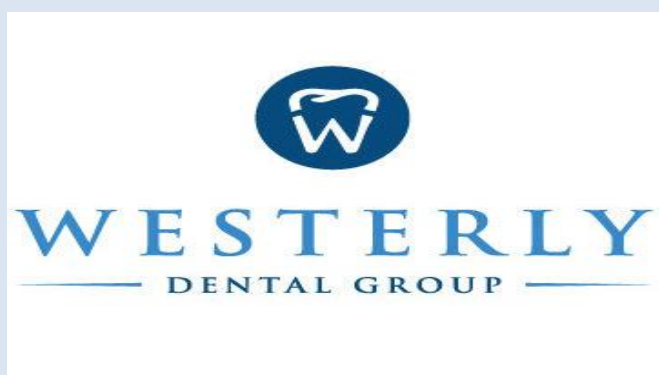
Within hours, the ship was sitting on the bottom of Fishers Island Sound in approximately fifty feet of water and the crew was sitting wet but safe in the Watch Hill Life Saving Station.

*Please Patronize Our Generous
Newsletter Sponsors*



Since 1910

401-596-0146



401-596-2848



401-315-2337



**Babcock Smith House Museum
401-596-5704**

Announcements

WESTERLY HISTORICAL SOCIETY & BABCOCK-SMITH HOUSE MUSEUM

ANNUAL 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.

The applications or nomination must be submitted by **April 1, 2025** by post mail to

Westerly Historical Society
PO Box 91
Westerly, RI 02891

or by email to 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.

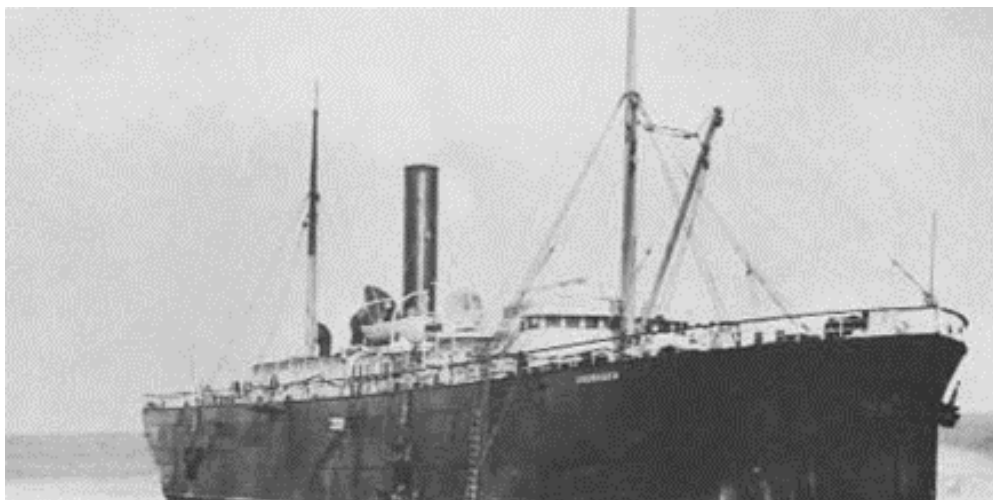
www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

www.babcocksmithhouse.org

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!

Recovered Cargo of The Wreck of the Steamship Onondaga



On June 28th in 1918, traveling at night in heavy fog, the captain of the Steamship Freighter Onondaga, mistakenly identified the Watch Hill foghorn as the Race Rock foghorn. It struck the Watch Hill Reef and sank.

Nearly four decades later, starting in the late 1950's, two friends began coming to Watch Hill on summer weekends to dive the many shipwrecks that have met their fate on the reefs and rocks off Watch Hill. Ron Shvonski and his diving buddy Don were good friends who loved diving and exploring. They would come to dive almost every weekend and loved the thrill of finding artifacts among the shipwrecks and bringing them back to shore. Among the artifacts they salvaged from the Onondaga were hundreds of small perfume bottles which were part of the ship's cargo. The small glass bottles have a capital letter P in the base of the glass and are approximately two inches tall and one inch in diameter.

Sheri and Mike Shvonski, the Son and Daughter in Law of Ron Shvonski, recently donated several of these small perfume bottles to the Westerly Historical Society. We are very fortunate that the Shvonski family chose us to preserve these local artifacts that were literally salvaged from the depths of the ocean by Ron Shvonski!

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 # 024 - The Benjamin Gavitt Lot

By Robert Peacock

There were reportedly four burials in this cemetery which is approximately twenty feet by twenty feet and contains one inscribed stone and three unmarked fieldstones. The most recent burial was in 1849 and the oldest burial is unknown.

Although records do not indicate the burial dates for three of the people interred here, the information documented by Frederic Denison in the 1860's, indicates the remains of the following individual is buried here: Benjamin Gavitt, who was born in 1774 and died on February 18th of 1849.

According to the records of the Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries Commission, his coffin plate was created by Thomas Perry, a local silversmith, who created coffin plates for several coffins during the middle of the 1800's.

The cemetery is enclosed by a broken stone wall of large, lichen covered rocks. The cemetery is covered in vines and brush with a thick layer of fallen leaves. The inscribed stone is present but barely legible.

There are at least three visible fieldstone markers scattered throughout the cemetery although they have sunken into the ground and are only a few inches exposed. They can be seen if you look very closely.

According to the 1878 book by Frederic Denison, "Westerly and Its Witnesses", the cemetery was recorded in 1860's as being "situated on the top of a knoll or hillock, by the side of the post road, on the north side of the road, nearly southwest of the residence of the late Joseph Gavitt, 2d, and is protected by a stone wall."

Denison also noted that "It contained three of four unlettered graves, and one with an inscription: Benjamin Gavitt, died Feb. 18, 1849, age 75."

The cemetery is located approximately forty feet from Route One and thirty feet from Pendleton Lane. It is across from 3 Pendleton Lane and behind pole number 5 over 3511, at the top of a slight hill, on land between Pendleton Lane and Route 1.

Access is easier from Pendleton Lane. While facing the cemetery from Pendleton Lane, look for the gradual sloping path leading up and in from the right side of the cemetery.

For those using GPS, the cemetery is located at 41 Degrees, 21 minutes, and 1.7 seconds North by 71 degrees, 45 minutes, and 11.5 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, and the personal knowledge of Cemeteries Commissioner Larry Hunter.



The cemetery is between Route 1 and Pendleton Lane on a slight knoll.



The fieldstones have sunken considerably but are visible if you look closely



The cemetery is enclosed by a broken stone wall of large, lichen covered rocks. It is heavily covered in vines and brush with a thick layer of fallen leaves. There are at least three visible fieldstone markers scattered throughout the cemetery although they have sunken into the ground and are barely visible.



The 1849 inscribed stone of Benjamin Gavitt is still standing tall in the cemetery but the inscription is no longer readable. Fortunately, it was recorded in the 1860's by Denison as Benjamin Gavitt, died Feb. 18, 1849, age 75.



Access is easier from the Pendleton Lane side. While facing the cemetery from Pendleton Lane, look for the gradual sloping path leading up and in to the right side of the cemetery.

Bridging the Divide Between Two States: The Pawcatuck River Bridge

By Zachary Garceau

“Under the agreement between the two states, Rhode Island would build the eastern half of the bridge while Connecticut would construct the western half. In February 1734, a committee was appointed to build half of the bridge while the town of Stonington would construct the other half.”

For more than three centuries, the bridge in what is now downtown Westerly that spans the Pawcatuck River has served as the primary crossing point between two communities. First constructed in 1712, the bridge has gone through seven different iterations while remaining a critical part of the community.

For the first forty-three years of Westerly’s history after being incorporated in 1669, there was no bridge across the Pawcatuck River in the location where the most notable crossing exists today. Prior to the construction of the first known bridge, crossings were performed by fording the river at an old trail originally used by local indigenous tribes located just above where the bridge stands today.ⁱ In the year 1712, it was recorded that a bridge be allowed to be built across the Pawcatuck River provided it be built by subscription and “be built in the highway.”

Largely due to the quality of materials available at the time as well as the significant use that the bridge likely saw, repairs were needed fairly often. In 1721, nine years after the first record of the bridge, Isaac Thompson was paid fifteen pounds for repairing half of the bridge and he was later paid an additional eighteen pounds and twelve shillings for further work performed. It seems the work done by Thompson was temporary, as another man, Peleg Rhodes, was paid for additional work on the bridge in 1722 and 1724.

After just nineteen years in operation, it was noted in 1731 that the bridge was in a state of significant decay and was “rendered impassible, either for man or horse. Because the bridge was in such a state of disrepair, Captains Oliver Babcock and William Clarke went before the Rhode Island General Assembly and petitioned that money be withdrawn from the general treasury for the purpose of rebuilding Rhode Island’s portion of the bridge.

The specification of payment for “this government’s [Rhode Island’s] part” was important, as the bridge, ever since it was first constructed, was considered to be a split responsibility between Rhode Island and Connecticut.

This shared responsibility came into play in 1734 when it was decided that the bridge would be rebuilt. Under the agreement between the two states, Rhode Island would build the eastern half of the bridge while Connecticut would construct the western half. In February 1734, a committee was appointed to build half of the bridge while the town of Stonington (and not the State of Connecticut, interestingly) would construct the other half.

Continued on Next Page

Bridging the Divide Between Two States: The Pawcatuck River Bridge

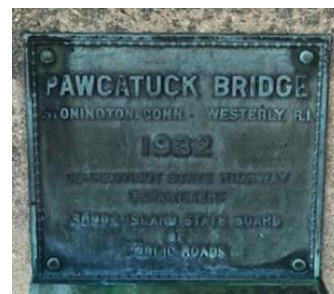
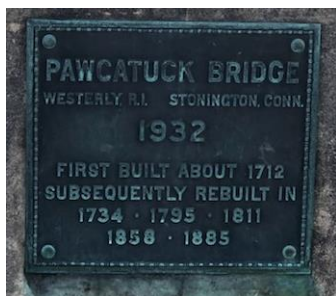
By Zachary Garceau

In February 1735, Cols. Joseph Stanton and Oliver Babcock (the latter of whom had petitioned the General Assembly for funding four years prior) were “directed and empowered” to build one half of the bridge and the men were paid two years later for performing repairs on the bridge. The second bridge spanning the Pawcatuck River lasted longer than the original bridge, surviving for six decades until it required replacement once again in 1795. Over the course of the bridge’s existence, it also required frequent repairs, with money being appropriated in November 1746, February 1756, February 1759, August 1767, August 1772, March 1781, September 1790, June 1793, and finally in January 1795.

Very little is known about the bridge constructed in 1795, however, it is noted as one of the bridge’s rebuilds on the marker added to the bridge upon the completion of its most recent version in 1932. The bridge was subsequently rebuilt twice more in 1811 and 1858. In 1885, another bridge was constructed on the same site, and this bridge became the first over the Pawcatuck River that was not made of wood. In 1912, there was discussion of potentially paving the bridge, but it is unclear if this ever came to fruition. By 1930, there were reports that significant work was needed on the bridge, which ultimately prompted the construction of the current bridge in 1932.

In January 1932, Representative Richard S. Aldrich of Rhode Island’s 2nd District brought forth bill H.R. 7247 which authorized the Rhode Island State Board of Public Roads and the State Highway Department of Connecticut to “construct, maintain, and operate a free highway bridge across the Pawcatuck River near the location of the present Broad Street Bridge between Westerly, R.I. and Stonington, Conn.” The bill was referred to the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce and was approved by Congress.

In 1932, a new T-Beam slab bridge of reinforced concrete on two pillars ten feet above the water was constructed in its current location. This same bridge has been serving the towns of Westerly and Stonington for more than ninety years, making it longer lasting than any of the bridges that came before it. In 2015, it was estimated that as many as 26,000 cars crossed the bridge each day, signifying its continued position as the main artery through the heart of Westerly.



Photos of the three bronze plaques on the current bridge.

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



A very special thank you to our generous newsletter sponsors!

**When you choose to shop
at **The Wine Store**
you help us fund local
non-profit organizations**



The Wine Store®

BEER - WINE - LIQUOR

86 Franklin St, Westerly, RI 02891
401-596-6160 Next to TJMaxx, Home Depot

Your Partner in Community Service ©



\$15.00 Gift Card
From Frank, Donna and Tim

GreySail®
BREWING of RHODE ISLAND



**VISIT OUR CAMPUS IN WESTERLY'S
HISTORIC NORTH END!**

Brewery:

Facebook.com/GreySail

@greysail

www.greysailbrewing.com

Distillery:

Facebook.com/SouthCountyDistillers

@southcountydillers

www.southcountydillers.com

63 Canal Street, Westerly