



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

April 2025

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Program Notes

WESTERLY SPORTS HISTORY PROGRAM

Westerly Sports History

By Zachary Garceau

WEDNESDAY APRIL 9TH 6:30 PM

At the Carriage House

124 Granite Street

DISCOVERING THE 1811 WRECK OF THE NAVAL SCHOONER "USS REVENGE".

This program was very well attended by more than forty guests! Our sincere appreciation to Charles Buffum and Craig Harger for presenting the program and our sincere thanks to the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association for co-sponsoring the event.

SAVE THE DATE

We will be co-sponsoring a program on the Grand Hotels of Watch Hill by Jack Spratt with the Watch Hill Conservancy on July 2nd.

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

What famous Broadway actor and silent film star married Anna Beth Sully in 1907 in Watch Hill?

Hints – He was the first to play the masked vigilante Zorro, he was a founding member of United Artists and the Motion Picture Academy, and he passed at the age of 56 in 1939.

The answer is on the next page!

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WESTERLY'S WITNESS

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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 friends,

I would like to start by introducing and welcoming our
two most recent additions to the Executive Board.

Paul Gingerella and Mary Jo Girard have volunteered
to join us and assist in our mission to research, study,
and preserve the local history in our community. We
are honored to have them both and we look forward to
working with them!

Spring is here and as the sun thaws all things it's a
beautiful reminder that life is good! For all of you
considering some Spring Cleaning, please remember
us here at your society as a destination for whatever
local historical items you might have stored in your
basement, garage or attic.

Please contact myself at WHSPresident@gmail.com
or our archivist at WHSArchivist@gmail.com to meet
and discuss the possibility of donating your artifacts to
our collection to preserve your memories and to share
them with others.

**Please save the date for our annual dinner meeting
on Wednesday, May 28th! Details to follow!**

Before we take a well-deserved break for the Summer,
be sure to join us once again on July 2nd at the Livery
located at One Bay Street in Watch Hill. We will be in
the Chaplain Barnes Reading Room for a presentation
on the history of the grand hotels of Watch Hill by our
friend and member Jack Spratt. It is certain to be very
entertaining and educational!

Be well. Tom

EDITOR'S NOTES

Robert Peacock

***Thank you to Jane Perkins and Jack Spratt
for contributing articles and photos for this
month's newsletter.***

***As always, we welcome guest authors to
contribute articles and photos!***

TRIVIA ANSWER – Douglas Fairbanks married Anna
Beth Sully on July 11th of 1907. He summered in Watch
Hill in a mansion on Ridge Road named Kenneth Ridge
owned by Anna's father, Daniel Sully, who was a highly
successful commodities and securities broker. Anna was
the first of three wives for Douglas.

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WATCH HILL PASSAGE - AID TO NAVIGATION

By Captain Jack Spratt

The first actual Aid to Navigation (ATON) through the hazardous Watch Hill Passage was constructed in October 1801. Captain John Earl, Jr. of Newport solicited monies from various Newport merchants interested in the safety of their ships and cargo transiting Watch Hill.

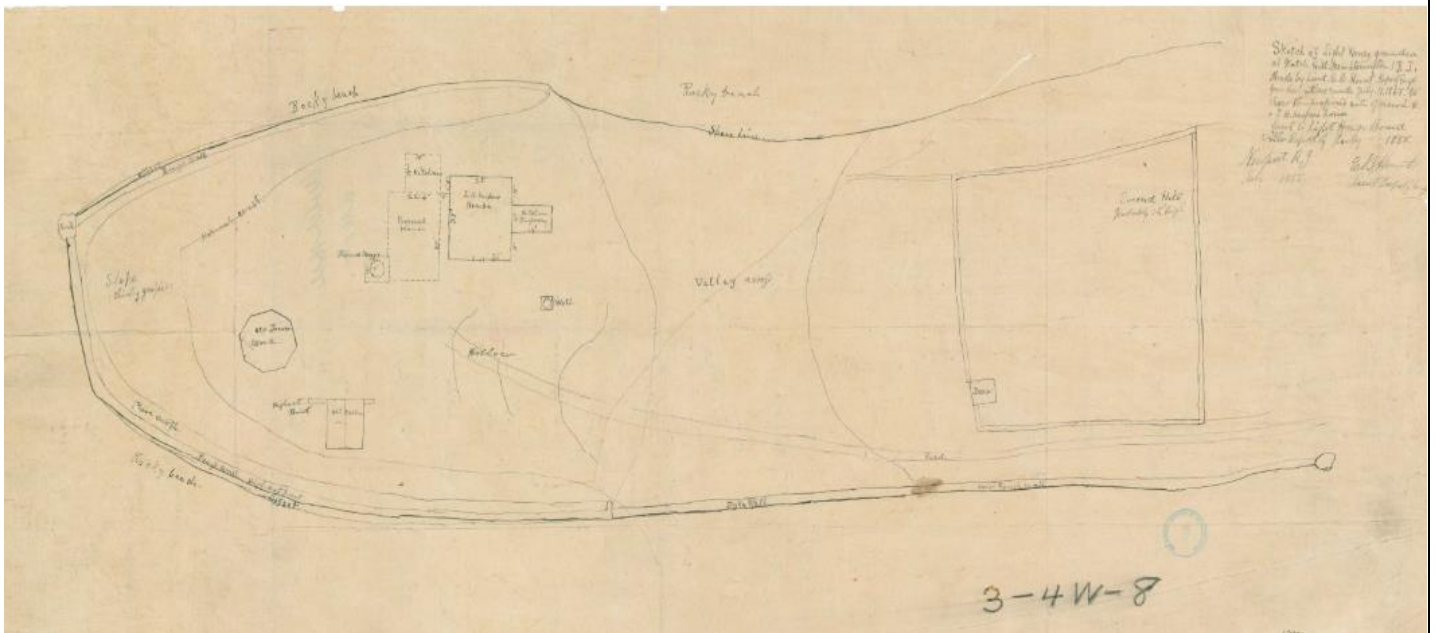
An iron spindle was hand-drilled upon the rocks at the east end or the tail end of Watch Hill Reef. A large black ball was mounted on the top of the spindle, with a director (directional arrow), which was painted white and pointed northward and westward. The letters W N were painted in black upon the white director, showing the safe course to be west by north to Latimer's Rock, in Fishers Island Sound, which had a similar spindle and ball upon it, erected by William Lord of Stonington, in September of 1801.

Five years later, on January 22, 1806, President Thomas Jefferson signed "An Act to provide for lighthouses in Long Island Sound", including a light at Watch Hill. On May 3, 1806, George and Thankful Foster sold four acres to William Ellery, Customs Collector at Newport and Regional Superintendent of the United States Lighthouse Service, for five hundred dollars.

An octagonal, shingled wood tower was completed in 1807. Local coastal Captain Jonathan Nash, a future Watch Hill hotel developer, was appointed as the first Lighthouse Keeper.

In 1855-56, a replacement lighthouse, keepers' quarters, and oil building were built fifty feet shoreward from the original beacon, which was in danger of collapsing into the sea due to erosion. A seawall of large Westerly granite blocks was also built during this time to protect the buildings.

A large, framed copy of the sketch below, as well as many other artifacts can be viewed when the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Museum is open for the season on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, from 1 PM to 3 PM, in June and July.

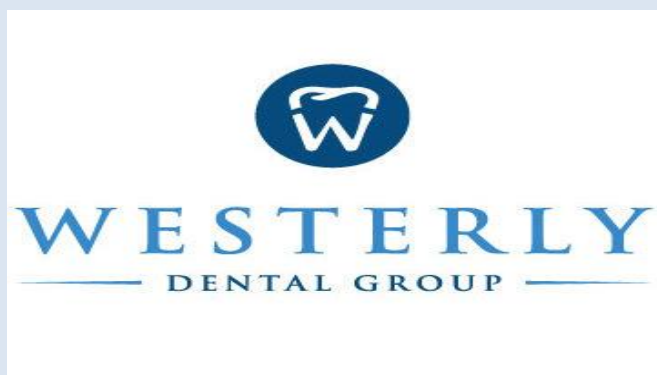


**1856 sketch of the existing lighthouse and the new buildings.
Courtesy of National Archive Records and Jack Spratt Collection**

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Announcements

New Executive Board Members

Please welcome our two most recent additions to the Executive Board of the Westerly Historical Society.

Paul Gingerella and Mary Jo Girard both have very deep family ties to our community, and both exhibit a strong passion for protecting and preserving history.

They have volunteered to join us and assist in our mission to research, study, and preserve the local history in our community

We are honored to have them both joining us and we look forward to working with them!

That's One for the History Books

A new book by a Westerly Historical Society member

That's One for the History Books, is a new book by Westerly Historical Society member Hugh Ryan of Westerly and co-author, Martin Cohn of Vermont.

The book, published by Amazon, explores pivotal moments in American history. It describes inventions, innovations, and political, military, and social actions that have rippled worldwide and down through the decades. The authors recount what they view as significant historical events, unsung heroes, and turning points in American history. They provide fresh perspectives on stories we thought we knew.

One chapter was suggested by the Westerly Historical Society and recounts the life-saving heroism of a Westerly resident, Henry Morris, during the 1938 hurricane. His descendants still live in Westerly.

The book presents the first year of scripts from their weekly podcast by the same name, available on Spotify. The book and podcasts are designed to shine a spotlight on Americans who made important contributions to our country, but who have not received the acclaim we think they deserve.

Profiles include inventors, builders, entrepreneurs, warriors, lawyers, journalists, scientists, doctors, politicians, activists, and spies.

That's One for the History Books is available in paperback and digital formats from Amazon, \$7.50 for the paperback and \$5 on Kindle. Episodes of the podcast drop every Wednesday morning on Spotify.

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!

Photos of 1938 Sisson Block Fire in Watch Hill

Included in the collections of the Westerly Historical Society are these photos of the Sisson Block Fire in Watch Hill. This fire occurred in 1938 and completely destroyed the Sisson Building. However, the firefighters were able to save the two nearby buildings that were also on fire.



A view looking downhill towards the old Watch Hill Yacht Club shows the devastation of the fire.



The left photo shows the badly damaged but saved Columbia House Hotel which was about twenty feet from the fully involved Sisson Building. It is now the home of the Olympia Tea Room.

The right photo shows the slightly damaged but saved Fish Market which was just ten feet from the fully involved Sisson Building. It is now the home of Seaport Studios.

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 # 074 - The Samuel P. Sims Ground

By Robert Peacock

There were reportedly 15 burials in this cemetery with 10 marked by fieldstones and 5 marked by carved headstones. The most recent known burial was in 1869 and the oldest known burial was in 1817.

Included are the remains of Samuel P. Sims, who was born in 1790 and passed on October 22nd of 1869 at the age of 79 and his wife Sally Sims, who was born in 1795 and passed on January 10th of 1875. His marble headstone has an intricately carved cursive letter S above his name and death date while her marble headstone appears to be broken in half.

Also buried here is Eunice Dunbar, daughter of Thomas and Eunice Dunbar, who was born in 1800 and passed on November 19th of 1817. Her sandstone marker includes a carving of an urn and a willow tree and notes that she died in her eighteenth year.

The cemetery is approximately ninety feet by fifty feet and is surrounded by a stone wall of large stones.

According to the 1878 book by Frederic Denison, "Westerly and Its Witnesses", the cemetery was recorded in 1860's as being "Between the post road and the shore road, on lands of the heirs of Oliver Wilcox, near one hundred rods southwest from the late residence of David Rathbun, in a pasture, unenclosed, and overgrown with bushes and vines, are a number of unlettered graves, belonging by report, to the Sims family."

The carved markers of Samuel and Sally were added when they passed after Denison's visit in the 1860's and the stone wall was also apparently added after his visit. Perhaps his description of the cemetery being "overgrown with bushes and vines" explains why he did not record the carved marker of Eunice Dunbar.

The cemetery is located approximately 200 feet from Shore Road on the Pond and Ocean side, in the same stone wall enclosure as Westerly Cemetery #003 (Please See the November 2023 Newsletter For Details on # 003). The cemeteries are located on the South Side of Shore Road in the area of 249 Shore Road.

Access is relatively easy from the road through the light brush and trees with the exception of the first few steps taken by the road through the break in the stone wall just fifteen feet from Shore Road. The stones are uneven and there is a slight decline on the back side of the wall which makes it a bit difficult and requires holding on to the post of the #003 cemetery sign.

To access the Sims Ground, travel through the front cemetery which is #003 and away from Shore Road to reach the #074 cemetery which is in the back.

For those using GPS, the cemetery is located at 41 Degrees, 20 minutes, and 27.0 seconds North by 71 degrees, 46 minutes, and 51.6 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.



Some of the markers stand tall while others are barely visible in the overgrowth. The upper left photo shows a marker concealed by heavy brush and vines. The upper right photo shows a marker that has almost completely sunken into the ground. The lower photo shows three tall grave markers but the middle marker is leaning significantly. Unfortunately, the carvings on these markers are almost illegible due to the passage of time and the effects of the weather.



The tall marker in the left photo stands straight and tall but appears to be camouflaged as it blends in with the trees, leaves, and vines. The two markers in the right photo have given in to the ravages of time and weather and are leaning heavily and will soon be flat on the ground. Unfortunately, these carvings are also almost illegible due to the passage of time and the effects of the weather.



The cemetery is heavily covered with bull briars and vines and is overgrown with dense brush and large trees including this very unusual tree with a unique bulbous feature about a quarter of the way up.

The Watch Hill Lighthouse - A Brief History

By Jane Perkins



1950's Era Photo of The Watch Hill Lighthouse with the Keepers Residence, Fog Signal Building, Oil House, and Garage as well as the United States Life Saving Station with the Station Keeper Quarters, Crew Quarters, Boat House, and Garage in the background.

On January 22nd of 1806, Congress passed, and President Thomas Jefferson approved and signed into law, "An Act to provide for lighthouses in Long Island Sound", which provided for the erection of several lighthouses along the coast including a lighthouse on Watch Hill Point.

On May 3, 1806, George and Thankful Foster of Westerly sold four acres of land at Watch Hill Point for \$500 to William Ellery, Superintendent of the United States Lighthouse Service, and a round, shingled, wood tower was completed in 1807. The light was supplied by a bank of ten whale oil lamps. A one-story house for the keeper was built nearby. These structures stood for almost 50 years before being damage significantly by a series of storms.

In 1855, construction began on a new lighthouse. The gradual wearing away of the bluff by the action of the waves made it advisable to build the new lighthouse further back from the shore, and the new structure was located about 50 feet northwest of the earlier one. At the same time, the shoreline was reinforced with large granite blocks taken from the quarries in Westerly.

The new tower was built of gray Westerly granite. It measures 45 feet in height and 10 feet square and is constructed of rough-faced gray granite blocks that are about 12 inches thick, 18 inches high, and of two different lengths, 8 and 10 feet. The granite blocks were placed to create quoins at the corners. The three-story light tower is topped with a cast-iron and glass lantern room that originally contained a Fresnel fourth-order lens which is now in the museum on the property.

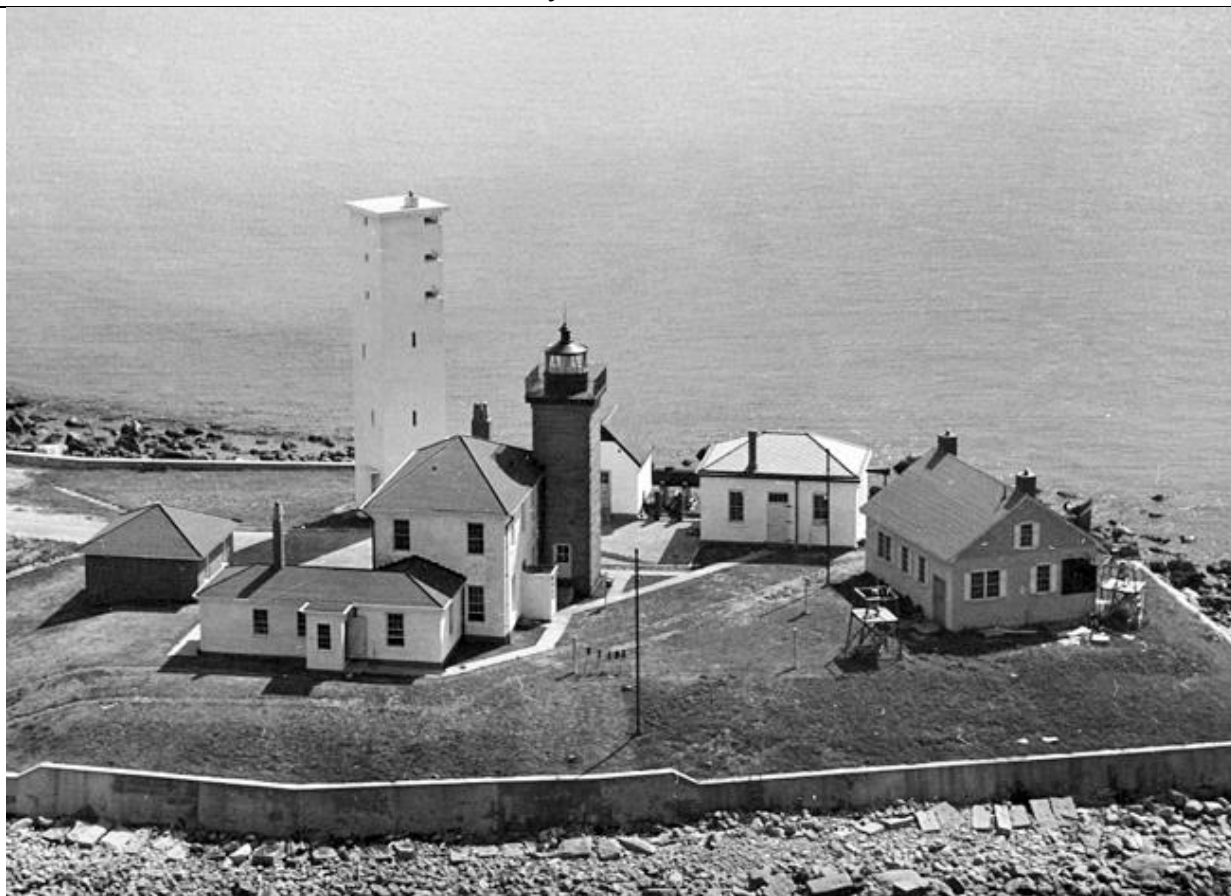
The type of construction and architecture differed considerably from many other New England lighthouses built during this period since the availability of granite from the quarries in Westerly made it common to construct public buildings in the immediate area using rough-faced granite blocks. This practice was limited to and was unique to southern Rhode Island.

The Lighthouse Keepers residence was constructed at the same time and is attached to the granite tower. The keeper's house is built of brick and was an example of a common style of 19th-century architecture.

Continued on Next Page

The Watch Hill Lighthouse - A Brief History

By Jane Perkins



1940's Era Photo of The Watch Hill Lighthouse with the Keepers Residence, Fog Signal Building, Oil House, and Garage as well as the temporary United States Army Barracks and Observation Tower.

The Lighthouse Keepers residence was constructed at the same time and is attached to the granite tower. The keeper's house is built of brick and was an example of a common style of 19th-century architecture. A cast concrete Oil House was later built around the turn of the century and a brick Fog Signal Building was erected in 1909. The property has been part of the Watch Hill Historic District and has been listed within the National Register of Historic Places since September 1985.

Today, the buildings and grounds of the Watch Hill Lighthouse are preserved and protected through the efforts of the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association (WHLKA). The Lighthouse became fully automated on August 31 of 1986, and on that day, the Lighthouse Keepers entered into a lease agreement with the Coast Guard allowing for the use of the property for the enjoyment of visitors.

In 2024, the WHLKA, was officially awarded full ownership of the buildings and property. They intend to continue to uphold the important mission to protect and preserve the buildings and the grounds while providing educational and passive recreational opportunities for the public.

Normal property hours are 8 AM to Sunset throughout the year. The Lighthouse property can be accessed by foot via a private road and vehicles are only permitted for handicapped visitors and senior citizens. The Lighthouse and the adjacent structures are closed to the public with the exception of the museum which is open in July and August on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 1 PM to 3 PM.

The Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Museum is operated and maintained by dedicated keepers and volunteers. They welcome visitors to explore the captivating history and enjoy the stunning views.

Continued on Next Page

The Watch Hill Lighthouse - A Brief History

By Jane Perkins



1930's Era Photo of The Watch Hill Lighthouse with the Keepers Residence, Fog Signal Building, Oil House, and Garage as well as the United States Life Saving Station with the Station Keeper Quarters, Crew Quarters, New Boat House, Old Boat House, Garage, and an unknown small building.



The Museum houses the original 1856 Fourth Order Fresnel Lens that was removed from the Tower following automation in 1986. The Museum collection also features many historical documents, photographs, and paintings that illustrate various views of the buildings and property as well as the operations and activities of the lighthouse keepers. Additional highlights include records of notable local shipwrecks, photographs of the 1938 hurricane damage, and images of vessels that navigated the local waters.

Much of the information for this article was primarily taken from the website of the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association.

For additional details and further information, please visit their website at www.watchhilllighthousekeepers.org

The author of this article, Jane Perkins, is a former Watch Hill Lighthouse Keeper and Resident Caretaker. She is now the office manager and the museum curator for the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association.

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