



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

October 2025

Westerly Historical Society Executive Board 2024-2025

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In this Issue

Program Notes	Page 1
Presidents Corner	Page 2
Editors Notes	Page 2
Westerly Armory History.....	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
Regional History Fair	Page 9
The Year Without a Summer.....	Page 10
The Year Without a Summer.....	Page 11
Sponsor Recognition.....	Page 12

Program Notes

REGIONAL HISTORY FAIR

We will be co-hosting a regional history fair with the Westerly Armory on Saturday, October 25th, from 1 PM to 4 PM. Please plan on joining us to meet and learn from our friends from the various historical groups and museums throughout Rhode Island and Connecticut. **See Page 9 for details!**

REVOLUTIONARY WAR IN WESTERLY

Our September program with Jean Gagnier focused on the Declaration of Independence and its connection to the people of Westerly. It was well attended, and we appreciate all 46 guests who joined us for an interesting presentation.

SEEKING SPEAKERS AND WRITERS

We are always seeking speakers and writers to present programs for the society and to write articles for our newsletters. If you are familiar with a local history topic and enjoy talking or writing about your passion, please let us know.

TRIVIA QUESTION

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

Former Rhode Island Governor Samuel Ward died of Smallpox while in Philadelphia serving as the Rhode Island Delegate in the Continental Congress which drafted the Declaration of Independence.

Where was he buried first and where was he buried last?

The answer is on the next page!



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.

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President's Corner

Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

Hello friends,

It's October, and that means it is membership renewal month. I suspect that you all enjoy your membership benefits and certainly don't want them interrupted for a moment. Well, you will be receiving a renewal form in the mail soon from membership chairperson Cory Jacobson and me. I ask you to please renew at the least, at the level you committed to last year, or really let us know how much you appreciate our efforts to deliver to you the best membership benefits available by stepping up a level or two on our menu of membership gift levels offered.

I guarantee that we are always making the effort to raise the level of our performance with great quality programs, informative and educational newsletters, access to knowledgeable historians, and archival historical photos and printed history.

Your current WHS board of directors has doubled down their efforts this year by allowing me to commit to exploring the possibility of finding a permanent home for our 112 year old collection. It has been our goal for years to find a suitable place to showcase the fabulous collection of our historic items for you and others to enjoy at your leisure.

Don't forget to join us at the Westerly Armory on the 25th of this month for our second history fair. Thank you to Bob Peacock and Becky Jacoinski for taking the lead on organizing this event. The event would not be possible without their tireless efforts!

See you soon, Tom

EDITOR'S NOTES

Robert Peacock

*Thank you to our guest author this month,
Anngenetie Cottrell Tyler Stanfield.*

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

TRIVIA ANSWER – Samuel Ward was initially buried in 1776 in the churchyard of the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia. In 1860, his body was exhumed and reburied in the Common Burying Ground in Newport.

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History of the Westerly Armory

Excerpted From The Westerly Armory Website

The historic Westerly Armory has been restored to its place as community icon and now serves as a museum, an event venue, home to The Westerly Band (America's oldest active community band), and largest memorial in Washington County to all veterans.

Erected in 1901 after the wood-framed armory on Main Street was destroyed, the Westerly Armory is one of only 18 historic armories in the state of Rhode Island. It is on the National Register of Historic Places and is also a Save America's Treasures Site, awarded by the United States Congress.

The Westerly Armory was built in 1901, but before that, on Main Street, there was a wood-framed armory built in 1860 which did not live long but perished in the flames of fire and exploding ammunition at 1:00 am on 30 April 1899.

Born in 1901 and costing \$30,000, the new armory was erected in a new location on a triangle of land with Railroad Avenue and Dixon Street on two sides and West Street in the rear.

The Armory holds a vast number of community memories. It was the scene of sports activities such as basketball with the New York Celtics, boxing matches (a few with Rocky Marciano), and even bowling. The Armory boasted a one-lane bowling alley in the basement, as well as a rifle range.

During the 1920s, the Westerly Rifle Club met there for practice and competition. The Armory was at one time home to the Westerly Rifles, a state-chartered militia group.

Westerly's armory accommodated such community events as automobile shows, antiques shows, toy and doll exhibitions, dances, and book sales. Scouts met there, and boys and girls practiced their skills in basketball. The Armory served as a polling place for many years. There were weddings and receptions in the 6,000-square-foot drill hall.

Perhaps the Armory memory that makes people smile the most is mention of the annual poultry shows. Every Thanksgiving weekend (from 1901-1950s), the Westerly Armory played home to hundreds of chickens, ducks, turkeys, rabbits, guinea pigs, and their proud and hopeful owners. The competition was keen, and the Armory smelled of hay, seed, and cracked corn, sounded of cackling and crowing, and drew entire families. This was a serious competition and the social highlight of the Thanksgiving weekend.

The Westerly Armory previously housed various provisional and volunteer companies such as Company E, volunteers under charter and, for several years, an infantry company. The Fifth Company was formed in 1908 and was known as the Coast Artillery Corps, Rhode Island National Guard.

In 1917, the Fifth was drafted into Federal service, and in March of that year, the Company (109 officers and soldiers) gathered in the Armory to stand ready.

In 1921, Westerly raised a new company, known as the Fifth Company Coast Artillery Corp (RING). In only 10 days, a company of 52 men was both organized and federally recognized. The Company was later changed from the Fifth to the 349th Company, and then to Battery E, 243d Coast Artillery (HD), National Guard.

The Westerly Armory last housed the 169th Military Police Company, Rhode Island National Guard who left the Armory in 1996. Their motto, "Stand Ready," echoed the sentiment of earlier soldiers who drilled in the Armory Hall.

Currently, the Armory has found new purposes. It is the community's museum (both community and local military memorabilia are displayed), as well as home to America's oldest active civic band, The Westerly Band. The Band has a practice room, a small office and storage area for their library of music, some of which pre-dates the Civil War.

The Westerly Armory holds its crenelated head high above the neglect of the past. The Armory has been restored and developed by Westerly Armory Restoration, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to restoring and repurposing the Armory for its community. A capital campaign is running to raise funds to renovate the lower level for additional museum exhibition space, a community room, a museum workshop, a unisex and accessible restroom, and additional egress.

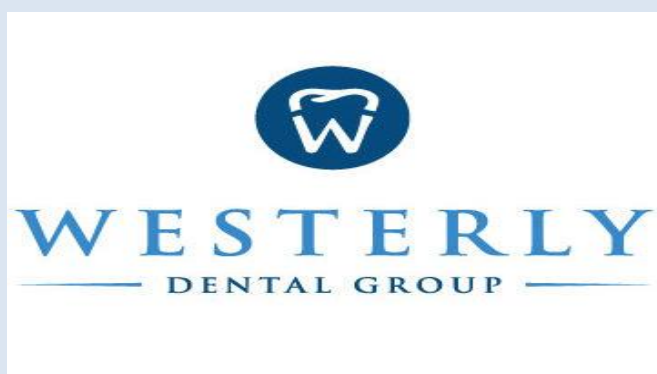
The Westerly Armory is open on Mondays and Thursdays from 9 AM to 4 PM and on other days by appointment. They are located at 41 Railroad Avenue in Westerly. Please visit their website for more information and please enjoy the fascinating and informative video tour of the armory and its amazing displays and collections.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

PLEASE JOIN US!!! **OCTOBER 25TH 1 PM TO 4 PM** **REGIONAL HISTORY FAIR**

We will be co-hosting a regional history fair with the Westerly Armory on Saturday, October 25th, from 1 PM to 4 PM.

Please join us to meet our friends from various historical groups throughout Rhode Island and Connecticut.

This free public event will showcase the numerous historical societies and museums in the surrounding area and allow a unique opportunity for the public to meet and greet members of these various organizations while viewing their favorite treasured artifacts.

The event is free and open to the public. Complementary drinks and light refreshments will be provided.

PLEASE SEE DETAILS ON PAGE 9

SAVE THE DATE

Our November 12th program will be an introduction to writers Ellen Madison and Maria Bernier and their new book covering Westerly Industries.

Please save the date and plan on joining us!

SAVE THE DATE

Our March 11th program will be an introduction to Carly Callahan, the Executive Director of the United Theater. She will discuss her family's efforts to accurately restore the exterior of their 1840 Greek Revival home on Elm Street as well as chat about the fascinating history and future of the United Theater.

Please save the date and plan on joining us!

From Our Archives

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

Since the society was founded in 1913, we have been the fortunate beneficiaries of the generous donations of thousands of old photographs including these beautiful and informative examples of Life in Westerly more than a century ago.



Westerly Armory

Main Street

Next to Seventh Day Baptist Church

Built in 1860

Remodeled in 1878

Burned in 1899



First National Stores

Main Street

Corner of Main Street and School Street

Built in 1859

*Housed the Town Clerks Office before
the "old" Town Hall was built in 1874*

**Please remember to consider us when disposing of old documents, photos, and artifacts.
We would love to add it to our expanding collection to be preserved for future generations.**

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 # 046 – The Henry Gavitt Ground

By Robert Peacock

There were reportedly 3 burials in this cemetery with one marked by fieldstones and two marked by carved and inscribed headstones. The most recent known burial was in 1909 and the oldest known burial was in 1852.

According to the records of the Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries Commission, the cemetery includes the remains of Henry C. Gavitt, who was born in 1797 and passed away on August 21st of 1852, as well as the remains of Saunders Gavitt, who was born in 1828 and passed in 1909. Saunders Gavitt was a veteran of the Civil War.

According to the 1868 book by Frederic Denison, “Westerly and Its Witnesses”, the cemetery was recorded in 1860’s as being “located on the land of the late Henry C. Gavitt, north of the post road, and north of Mr. Gavitt’s residence, on the west side of the drift-way, on the side of a hill, and is enclosed”.

Denison also noted that, “Two graves are apparent. One has this inscription: Henry C. Gavitt, died August 21, 1852, age 55.”

The cemetery is located approximately one half of a mile from Route 1 on South Woody Hill Road just before the Woody Hill Gardens sign and across from Westerly Cemetery Number 33. It is to the left of and slightly behind house number 54 and Pole number 111 (which also has yellow stickers with black letters that read 40K).

The cemetery is very well hidden by dense vines and heavy brush. It is barely visible from the neighboring yard. It is surrounded by a broken stone wall and although difficult to see and even more difficult to access. The cemetery does appear to have two inscribed stones and at least one unmarked fieldstone.

A visit will be scheduled this winter when the foliage is gone to further explore the area and to further attempt to locate other unmarked fieldstones or inscribed markers.

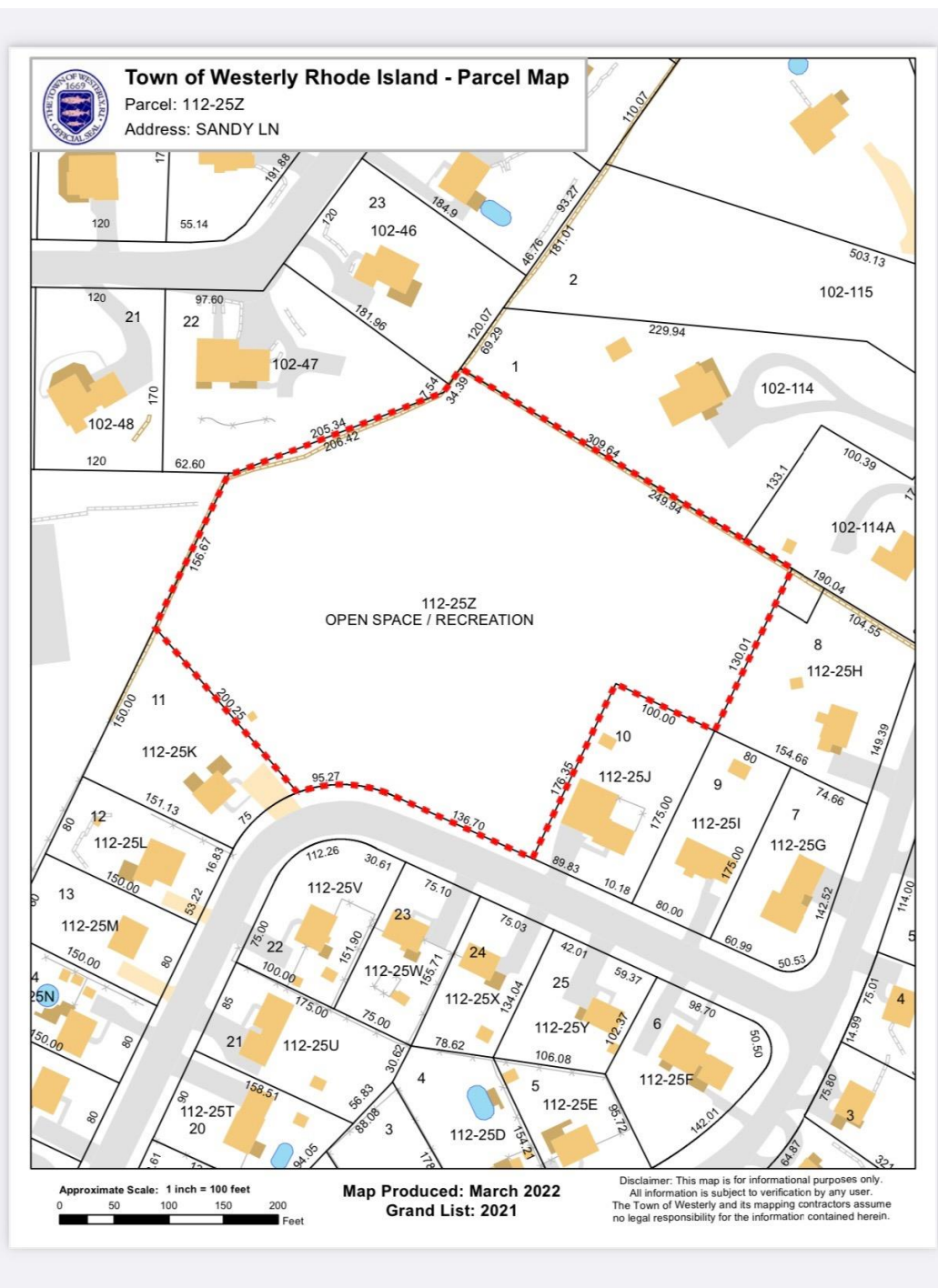
Access to the cemetery is very difficult without crossing private property on South Woody Hill Road but can be gained by travelling through the woods of the Town owned property located on Sandy Lane. However, this route is very difficult.

For those using GPS, the cemetery is located at 41 Degrees, 21 minutes, and 16.9 seconds North by 71 degrees, 45 minutes, and 44.8 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 information from the current owners of the neighboring property.

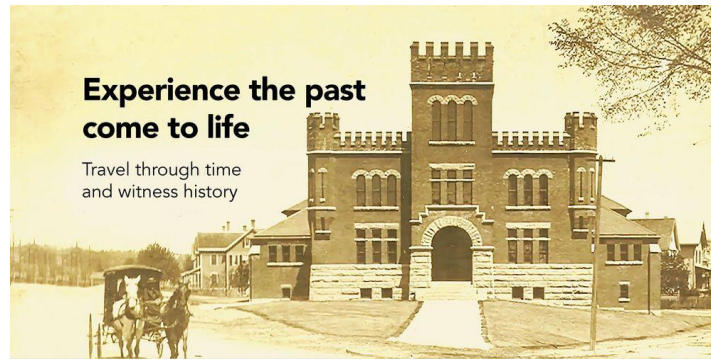


The cemetery is well hidden and covered with dense brush and vines. The fieldstone is barely visible and the two inscribed monuments are partially visible but the inscriptions are not easily readable.



The cemetery is well hidden by dense vines and brush and is barely visible from the neighboring yards. Access to the cemetery is very difficult without crossing private property on South Woody Hill Road but can be gained by travelling through the thick woods of the Town owned open space property located on the right side of Sandy Lane.

The cemetery is in the small box visible in the right side of the map in upper left corner of plot 112-25H.



“Regional History Fair”

Saturday, October 25th, 1:00 PM to 4:00 PM

Westerly Armory, 41 Railroad Avenue, Westerly, RI

This public event will showcase the numerous historical societies, associations, and museums in the surrounding region and will allow a unique opportunity for the public to meet and greet members of these various organizations while learning about their membership opportunities and viewing some of their favorite treasured artifacts.

Expected participants include representatives of the following Historical Groups

*Westerly Historical Society
Richmond Historical Society
Noank Historical Society
Stonington Historical Society
North Stonington Historical Society
Narragansett Historical Society
Exeter Historical Society
South County History Center
Johnston Historical Society*

*Charlestown Historical Society
Hopkinton Historical Society
Quonochontaug Historical Society
Ledyard Historical Society
Mystic River Historical Society
Preston Historical Society
Jamestown Historical Society
Warwick Historical Society
Old Mystic History Center*

Expected participants include representatives of the following Museums

*Babcock Smith House Museum
Peacedale Museum of Art and Culture
Stonington Lighthouse Museum
Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Museum
Captain Nathaniel Palmer House Museum
Nathan Lester House & Tool Museum
New England Wireless and Steam Engine Museum
Cranston Firefighters Museum
Greenwood Volunteer Fire Company Museum
Tomaquag Museum*

*Westerly Armory Peoples Museum
Denison Homestead Museum
Beavertail Lighthouse Museum
Old Mystic History Center
Stanton Davis Museum
Living Sharks Museum
South County Museum
Westerly Memorial Library
South County Museum*

**The event is free and open to the public.
Complementary light refreshments will be provided.**

**Co-sponsored by
The Westerly Historical Society and The Westerly Armory**

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

www.westerlyarmory.com

The Year Without A Summer – Part 1

By Anngenetette Cottrell Tyler Stanfield

Whether bitterly cold and snowy or an endless series of dreary gray days, New England winters make many of us long for summer. We count the days and console ourselves with the certainty that warmer, longer days will come and that the sun will prevail. This 2025 season that began with 15 consecutive soggy weekends has been a challenge, but summer did arrive on time, even if it showed itself only on weekdays.

But what if summer never came? This seems unimaginable, yet it happened in 1816. Dubbed “The Cold Summer of 1816”, “Year Without Summer”, “Poverty Year”, and “Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death”, 1816 in New England, Europe and northern Canada experienced the complete absence of summer.

According to weather recorders of the time, the year began deceptively mild. Except for a short cold snap in February, the first few months showed no cause for alarm. April, however, brought indications that something was amiss. “The early days were warm and bright, but as the month drew to a close, the cold increased until it ended in ice and snow and a very low temperature.”

“As the springtime approached, nothing in the weather indicated the return of seed time. Snows, heavy rains and cold months prevailed incessantly, and during the entire season, the sun rose each morning as though in a cloud of smoke, red and rayless, shedding little light and warmth and setting at night behind a thick cloud of vapor, leaving hardly a trace of it having passed over the face of the earth.”

Instead of being the month of rebirth with green trees, plentiful flowers and chirping birds, May was icy cold and devoid of anything green. Farmers valiantly attempted to plow through the hard frosty ground and plant their seeds at the appointed time, but they saw no crop. “Buds came but so did the frost, and one night laid all vegetation to blackened waste. Corn was killed and the fields had to be made ready for another planting, but the people’s astonishment was complete when they found ice formed to the thickness of half an inch in the pools.” “Planting and shivering were done together, and the farmers who worked out their taxes on the country roads wore overcoats and mittens.”

June the “month of roses” was this year the month of ice and desolation.” On June 6 and 7, 1816 a significant snowstorm hit New England. Vermont reported up to 18 inches of snow, 7 inches fell in Maine and 3 inches in Massachusetts. “During the month of June, young birds were frozen to death in their nests and so great was their destruction that for at least three years after, very few birds visited the colder parts of the northern states.”

The economic impact on the area was devastating. Farmers planted crop after crop of corn until it became too late to raise another. Nothing survived. Only a few farmers had enough corn seed to take them into the following year. One man, John Maxson of Ashaway, was dubbed the “king of Egypt” because he was one of the few that had a supply of corn to sell.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

The Year Without A Summer – Part 2

By Anngenette Cottrell Tyler Stanfield

“July was accompanied by frost and ice, and those who celebrated the glorious fourth ‘not wisely but well’ found an abundance of ice handy for immediate use the next morning!” During July most corn was destroyed, and the ears that did mature froze and had to be ground up for silage.

Surely August would warm up and usher in at least a brief summer! Hopes were raised as it began bright and warm but then dashed as “old Boreas and Jack Frost came along and whitened and hardened everything in their path. On the 16th, ice formed a quarter of an inch thick and winter clothing that had been laid away for a few days was again brought forth and wrapped around shivering humanity. By this time, the people had given up all hopes of again seeing the flowers bloom and hearing the birds sing and began to prepare for a hard winter.”

August was the worst of the supposed summer months. Almost all green plants and vegetables perished in the frost. The wheat, corn and oat crops were decimated, and food prices skyrocketed. Hay was the only crop which matured. “There was great privation and thousands of persons would have perished in this country if it had not been for the abundance of wild game and fish.” Interestingly, the harsh weather forced many to abandon their New England homes and head west, contributing to the Westward Expansion.

One writer stated, “the sun’s rays seemed to be destitute of heat through the summer; all nature seemed to be clad in a sable hue, and men exhibited no little anxiety concerning the future of this life.” Why was this happening? The unknown bred fears. Was the fire in the sun going out? Would life on earth be extinguished in the next few years? Ministers preached doomsday sermons and pseudo-scientific theories abounded.

The cause, as we now know, was a colossal volcanic eruption on the other side of the world. In April 1815, Mount Tambora in Indonesia erupted, causing the largest volcanic explosion in recorded history. This explosion released so much gas and ash into the air that the average global temperature dropped by three degrees Celsius. A cloud the size of Australia settled over a large section of the Northern Hemisphere. Eventually, the particles fell out of the air and the sun brought warmer temperatures, but this took time, and the summer of 1817 still retained cooler but less harmful temperatures.

Interestingly, the gloomy weather brought inspiration to several well-known writers. Trapped indoors in the Catskills, Mary Shelley wrote her famous “Frankenstein” during this time, a story filled with many dark, stormy, bleak scenes. Poet, Lord Byron wrote the poem, “Darkness”, one line of which read, “I had a dream, which was not all a dream. The bright sun was extinguished.”

Our appreciation is extended to one of our Westerly Historical Society members, Anngenette Cottrell Tyler Stanfield, for researching and writing this fascinating article.

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