



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

April 2026

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Program Notes

“THE WRECK OF THE ONONDAGA” WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8TH, 6:30 PM

Please join us as Bob Peacock and Jane Perkins discuss the 1918 sinking of the Onondaga off Watch Hill as a direct result of U-boats prowling the coast of Rhode Island during World War 1.

They will also display a variety of artifacts that were salvaged from the wreck and are displayed in the Watch Hill Lighthouse Museum

This program is being co-sponsored by our friends at the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association.

“THE WATCH HILL LIGHTHOUSE” WEDNESDAY, MAY 13TH, 6:30 PM

Please join us as Bob Peacock and Jane Perkins discuss the history of the Watch Hill Lighthouse.

They will also provide an advanced view of the new artifacts and displays in the recently renovated Watch Hill Lighthouse Museum

This program is being co-sponsored by our friends at the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association.

“RESTORING OUR ELM STREET HOME”

Thank you to Carly Callahan for her informative presentation. It was well attended!

TRIVIA QUESTION

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

When was the first actual Lighthouse built on Watch Hill Point and when was the second replacement lighthouse built which continues to shine its beacon today?

The answer is on the next page!

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WESTERLY'S WITNESS

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year in January, February, March, April, May, June,
September, October and November

The mission of the Westerly Historical Society is to
research, study, and preserve the local history in
our community. We are a dedicated, all-volunteer,
non-profit organization that owns numerous
historical artifacts and an extensive photographic
collection.

CONTACT US

President *Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.*

WHSPresident@gmail.com

Vice President and Archivist *Zachary J. Garceau*

WHSArchivist@gmail.com

Secretary *Becky Jacoinski*

WHSSecretary@gmail.com

Treasurer *Robert Boucher*

WHS Treasurer@gmail.com

Membership *Cory Jacobson*

WHSMembership@gmail.com

Programs *Robert Peacock and Becky Jacoinski*

WesterlyHistoricalSociety@gmail.com

Newsletter Editor *Robert Peacock*

WesterlyHistoricalSociety@gmail.com



Social Media *Jane C. Perkins*

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President's Corner

Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

Hello friends,

April always makes me reflect to the challenge that I had as a young boy trying to convince everyone at school that April 1st was actually my mother's birthday! You can imagine the difficulty of such a trivial task on a day assigned to foolishness.

Well, here we are many, many years later and I hope that you will believe me when I tell you that April is a busy month for your society!

Plans are being finalized for our annual dinner meeting, our summer program at the Livery at one Bay Street is coming together nicely for July 1st, our Reflections reception is coming up soon, we are selecting nominees for our annual history awards, and as always your dedicated board labors to provide you all with the best your organization has to offer!

I'm certain that there are no fools in our company!

Happy Spring everyone and best wishes, Tom

We are sad to recognize the death of Franklin Joseph Celico who passed away on February 27th at the age of 86. Born in Westerly, Frank was a pillar of the local business community and a generous and tireless supporter of the local non-profit organizations including the Westerly Historical Society. In addition to being long time members, Frank and his family have been sponsors of the newsletter for many years.

EDITOR'S NOTES

Robert Peacock

Thank you to

Larry Hunter, Thomas O'Connell, and Jane Perkins for contributing articles this month.

As always, we welcome guest authors to contribute articles, and we enjoy including them in the monthly newsletter!

TRIVIA ANSWER – *The first actual lighthouse was built in 1807 by order of President Thomas Jefferson. The current lighthouse was built in 1856.*

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“Shipwrecks on the Shores of Westerly”

By Jane Perkins

One of the many reference materials in the collections of the Westerly Historical Society is a copy of “Shipwrecks on the Shores of Westerly” by Margaret Carter. The following information is summarized from her book.

The author, Margaret Carter, notes that the coast of Westerly is approximately ten miles long from the Western tip of Sandy Point in Watch Hill to the Eastern boundary at Quonnie Breachway.

Carter opined that *“this small segment of the rugged New England Coast has probably been the scene of more shipwrecks and marine disasters than any other ten miles of shoreline on our Atlantic Coast.”*

She noted that from *“the Watch Hill Lighthouse Tower it is possible to see the entire coast. On a sunny windless day, the waters that lap the shoreline seem almost incapable of harm to shipping.”*

However, she also noted that *“the razor sharp reefs and other obstructions that stretch from Lighthouse Point are seldom above the surface except at low tides. Nor does the observer see the strong tidal rips that run between the reefs at change of tide.”* Carter reminds us that these dangerous reefs, *“while marked by buoys today, such aids did not exist a century ago.”*

In her book, Carter partially lists the shipwrecks along the coast of Westerly noting that it can only be considered a partial list as there is no official record of all shipwrecks along the coast and that many are remembered only by the stories and the legends that have been passed down through generations by our ancestors.

However, the partial list that she compiled included a total of 236 known and identified wrecks that occurred along the coast of Westerly between 1671 and 1973 when the book was originally published.

In relation to these shipwrecks, Carter also wrote extensively about the transport of coal off the shores of Westerly and the prevalence of pieces of coal along the beaches of Westerly. She notes that

a common form of coal transport used along the coast prior to World War II were the “coffin barges”. These large box shaped barges built of heavy timber were usually about 130 feet in length with a blunt bow. They were towed by tugboats on long tow lines made of heavy manila hemp.

In the early part of the century, a common sight from the Westerly beaches were tugboats pulling two or three coal barges. These barges carried coal along the coast to various ports throughout New England including most of the coal that was delivered to Westerly in the 1900’s.

A broken towing line or the sudden appearance of a storm with rough seas would often result in a barge running aground on the beach or sinking just offshore. Many of these wrecked barges were simply left to decay on the beaches of Westerly while others were emptied of their coal to lighten the loads as they attempted to salvage them.

One of many examples was the Schooner Nellie Vaughn. While carrying a cargo of coal, she struck an underwater obstruction off Watch Hill Point on July 12th of 1888 and began sinking. As she began taking on water, the Captain directed the crew to head for the shore and shallow waters. The schooner beached east of the Lighthouse.

In addition to these cargo ships transporting coal for delivery to ports along the coast, many other steam powered ships sank locally. These steam engines were coal fired, and these ships carried large quantities of coal to feed their furnaces.

Many families along the shore often collected their winter coal supply directly from the wrecked and beached barges while others collected their supply from the thousands of pieces of coal that regularly washed ashore from the sunken wrecks.

For more than one hundred and fifty years, this coal has washed ashore on local beaches and has been collected by residents and visitors.

Even today, especially after the winter storms, residents and visitors can still find large pieces of this century old coal lying on the beaches of Westerly.

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Announcements

WATCH HILL LIGHTHOUSE MUSEUM "Shipwreck Coal Display"

As noted in the story on the previous page, coal was a common commodity being shipped in schooners and barges in the late 1800's and early 1900's and many met their fate sinking just offshore or beaching along the coast of Westerly. In addition, numerous steam powered ships also sank locally while carrying large quantities of coal to feed their furnaces.

For one hundred and fifty years, this coal has been washed up on the beaches and collected by residents and visitors.

Thomas Gulluscio, the Westerly Historical Society President, is an avid winter beach walker who enjoys searching for and collecting beach glass.

At the request of Jane Perkins, the Office Manager and Curator of the Watch Hill Lighthouse Museum, Tom focused on collecting the pieces of ancient coal he often saw on the beach.

Within just a few hours, Tom had collected and donated more than fifty pounds of ancient coal pieces that had washed up on the beaches of Westerly.

This coal is now part of a display at the Watch Hill Lighthouse Museum. The display traces the history of the shipwrecks along the coast of Westerly and encourages visitors to hold a piece of this century old coal.

Children and adults are also allowed and encouraged to take a piece of coal with them to remind them of their visit to Westerly and to encourage them to continue to learn and to explore history.

BABCOCK SMITH HOUSE PROGRAMS

Our friends at the Babcock Smith House Museum are offering the following educational programs.

April 12th at 2 PM Hugh Barton will present "The Westerly Granite Companies".

April 26th at 2 PM Peter Ogle will present "Recognizing the Enslaved Westerly".

May 3rd at 2 PM John Concannon will present "Conspiracy to Destroy the Gaspee in 1772"

May 17th at 2 PM Sara Champlin will present "Babcock Portraits by Joseph Blackburn"

June 17th at 6 PM Robert Madison will present "Philip Freneau's War Poetry Reading"

NOTE This event is at the Westerly Library at 6PM

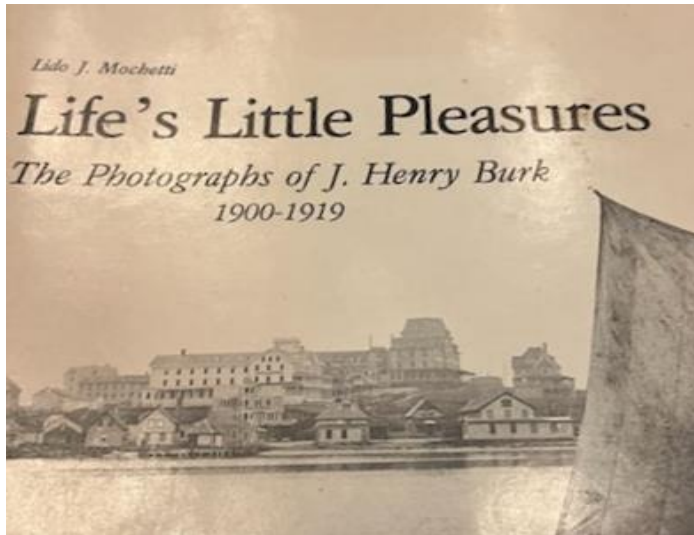
Please visit their website for more information on these and other interesting programs!

www.babcocksmithhouse.org

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!

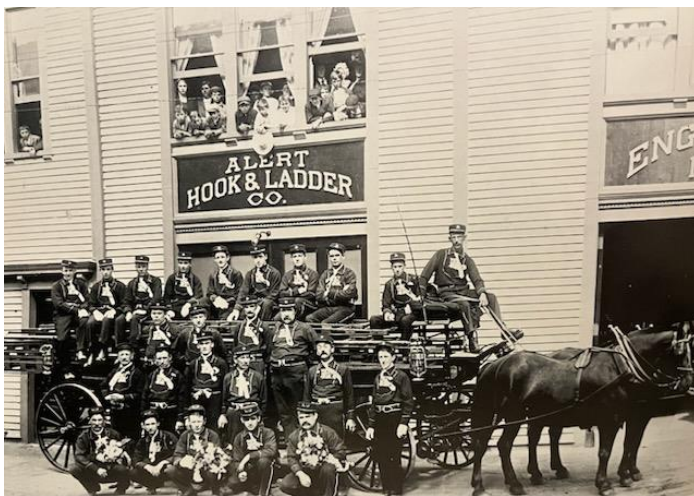
Our Collection includes the book titled “Life’s Little Pleasures” by Lido Mochetti featuring many of the photographs of J. Henry Burk taken from 1900 to 1919. These photos are also included in the glass negative collection in the archives of the Westerly Historical Society.



Cover of the book showing the hotels on Bay Street before the Great Watch Hill Fire of 1916.



Vehicles in front of the Columbia House which is now the Olympia Tea Room in 1912.



Members of the Alert Hook and Ladder Company with their horse drawn fire apparatus in 1911.



The view from the beach of the Ocean House with guests watching an event in 1912.

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

Cemetery Etiquette

By Larry Hunter

Editor's Note -

We have noticed that our research, articles, photos, and virtual tours of the various Historical Cemeteries located throughout Westerly have raised significant interest and motivated our members to go exploring.

We thought it would be prudent to share the safety recommendations of the Rhode Island Historic Cemeteries Commission as well as their recommendations for what to do and what not to do when visiting.

We appreciate the guidance of the Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries Commission, and we sincerely appreciate all of the hard work and efforts of our local Historic Cemeteries Commissioner, Larry Hunter.

Rhode Island Historic burying grounds are special and mysterious places. Within them are the silent and often unknown remains of our early forefathers and ancestors. They can be a Unique and Historic Resource and often pieces of art. The Epitaphs often tell stories about their life and their death.

The first thing to remember when you visit any cemetery is Safety! "Safety for yourself and Safety for the stone." Many stones are broken, leaning and or deteriorating. Obelisks and stacked monuments are often off center, from shifting due to age, ice buildup between layers and/or hit by lawnmowers/equipment. These stones can easily fall on someone and injure them and at the same time damage the stone. Headstones can be fragile, they may look fine, but it takes a trained eye to assess them. Please do not touch them.

We strongly encourage the use of insect repellent containing DEET to help ward off ticks and mosquitoes. You should always inspect yourself and inspect your clothing after visiting a cemetery and being out in the woods.

Some tips on reading headstones. Sometimes lightly wetting the stone with water brings the lettering out. Try looking at it from various angles. Shine a light on it from various angles. Time your visit to optimize the sun shining on the inscription. Remember, typically the face faces West, so an afternoon visit is optimum. Use a mirror to reflect light onto or across the stone.

Recommendations - Do's When Visiting a Historic Cemetery

Do – Obtain Permission. Many of our Historic Cemeteries are on private land and you should obtain permission from the landowner prior to entering. Even if you have ancestors in the cemetery, it does not give you the right to enter the property. Some cemeteries have deeded Right of Ways, which you'd have to research, but you should still touch base with the landowner.

Do - Be careful where you walk. Many cemeteries are overgrown, contain downed trees, limbs, and brush. Particularly in Westerly, we have those darn briars that will tear you up quickly. Trip hazards are abundant, from fieldstones barely sticking out of the ground, broken stones, tree roots and more. Stone walls and old fences can be hazardous.

Do – Understand the layout of the cemetery. Almost all of the historic cemeteries laid out before the 1850's have two stones to mark the location of the body. A headstone and a footstone or two fieldstones. You may not see both, but they are usually there. If you are reading the inscription on the headstone or footstone, the body is on the other side. Typically, a historic cemetery is laid out facing east-west, with the head at the west end and the inscription on the headstone facing west. They were laid out this way so they could see the rising sun of the lord in the morning. Note: Many old churches were laid out with the Altar in the east side of the church, so the congregation was facing east when worshipping.

Do – Bring a camera and take lots of pictures.

Do – Appreciate and enjoy the carvings, engravings and epitaphs and the variations in materials and styles of headstones.

Recommendations - Do Not's When Visiting a Historic Cemetery

Do Not – Sit, lean on, or rest against headstones.

Do Not – Attempt to rub lichen, moss, dirt or other contaminants and growth off a stone in order to read it, as this can damage the surface of the stone.

Do Not – Use household products or big box store products to try to clean stones, often, they have chemicals that are detrimental to stones and leave harmful residues. There are specialty products available.

Do Not – Perform gravestone rubbings. The practice of gravestone rubbing is now strongly discouraged. Well intentioned people can and have damaged stones. The stone may look sturdy, but a brownstone/sandstone may be delaminated just behind the face and pressure can cause it to fracture. Schist is another very sensitive material, many layers of minerals that can crumble when pressure is applied. Marble can be showing signs of sugaring, a condition where the stone is literally falling apart, this may be at ground contact or higher on the stone.

Do Not – Use chalk, shaving cream or other materials to try to read a headstone.

Do Not – Move or disturb stones laying on the ground. You may damage it and also disturb the evidence of where it belongs. Where a stone lies often tells an experienced person a story and provide hints as to where it belongs or where to look for other pieces of the stone.

Do Not – Attempt to repair a headstone. Repairs take hands on training and like cleaning, requires specialty products for performing the repair. An improper repair typically does more harm to the stone than leaving it lying on the ground.

Do Not – Use weed whackers against a headstone or footstone. Hand trim or leave the weeds standing.

REMEMBER - The first thing to remember when you visit any cemetery is Safety! “Safety for yourself and Safety for the stone.” Many stones are broken, leaning and or deteriorating. Obelisks and stacked monuments are often off center, from shifting due to age, ice buildup between layers and/or hit by lawnmowers/equipment. These stones can easily fall on someone and injure them and at the same time damage the stone.



Not sure what this young man was doing, but he managed to topple a 600lb Stone on himself. It was reported that he only suffered minor injuries.

April 2026



I searched for the bottom half of this stone for several years; I finally located it 6 feet away underground last fall and was able to begin the repair before winter set in. It was obvious that someone had moved this stone.



The broken stones in this cemetery were moved and piled against the wall. When they wanted to begin repairs, there was no evidence of what went where or where to begin.



A very simple trick to help read faded stones is to bring a mirror along with you.

Using a mirror to reflect the sunlight onto a stone can make reading the letters on the stone much easier.

This photo is courtesy of the website www.spiritsalive.org



The above two photos of the same stone are a great example of knowing the layout of the cemetery and optimizing the time of day when you visit. The picture on the left was taken in the morning and the picture on the right was taken a few hours later in the afternoon, when the sun was setting to the west making the stone much easier to read!

Remembering Osceola H. Kile

By Thomas O'Connell

I began my writing of local history for the Westerly Historical Society with the research and composition of the biography of Westerly High School's first principal. I was then an English teacher / Librarian at that institution.

To satisfy my curiosity of the town's history and to find subject matter to base my post-retirement energies. Walks in Riverbend Cemetery – a museum without the walls – proved to be the answer. Once among my hikes through these well-manicured and spacious acres, I spied Mr. Kile's monument.

What piqued my interest in this particular tombstone was this inscription:

**In Memory of
Osceola H. Kile
First Principal of the
Westerly High School.
Born Jan. 10, 1839.
Died Jan. 16, 1873.
Erected by the grateful
citizens of Westerly.**

Osceola Holcomb Kile must have been a man of strong intellectual and moral character to be so honored by the dedication of a monument to his achievements by the citizens of Westerly during his tenure in our town.

So impressed was I that I began to research his life and professional accomplishments. My travels brought me to upstate Lewis, New York, his birthplace. He also taught there in a one room schoolhouse whose heating required him to arrive well before the students as he had to stoke up the wood burning stove prior to the children's appearance.

In Vergennes, Vermont, I discovered that he was for five years the principal of the Vergennes Graded School.

Of course, much research was done among the local literature here in the Local History Room of the Westerly Public Library.

So the fates would ordain, in the Summer of 2022, I revisited Mr. Kile's monument in Riverbend Cemetery. It is composed of fragile marble and was most shabbily neglected. The stone had not been cleaned in 150 years (1873-2022). Therefore, to honor the source of my first local history story: "**A Biography – Osceola Holcomb Kile: First Principal of Westerly High School**" which was first printed in *The Westerly Sun* and later collected and printed by the Westerly Historical Society in my first book – **WESTERLY'S GOLD – HER PEOPLE**, I decided that this memorial must have a new life!!

The work of restoring the grandeur to that stone tribute to Mr. Kile began with a visit to the Cemetery Superintendent, Greg Howard. He liked the restoration idea, but he was hesitant to allow the stone to be cleaned because of its soft marble composition.

However, one of the cemetery staff members, Ray Wilkinson, convinced Mr. Howard that his gentle spray of chemicals would not injure the monument. The work was completed on 8 August 2022. The restored stone gleams so brightly that it is still visible from Beach Street. The cemetery charged no fee for the cleanup. Both Professor Kile and I are eternally grateful.

Our sincere thanks and appreciation to Thomas O'Connell, a long-time member of the Westerly Historical Society, for this article.

Please see the before and after photos of the cleaning on the following page.

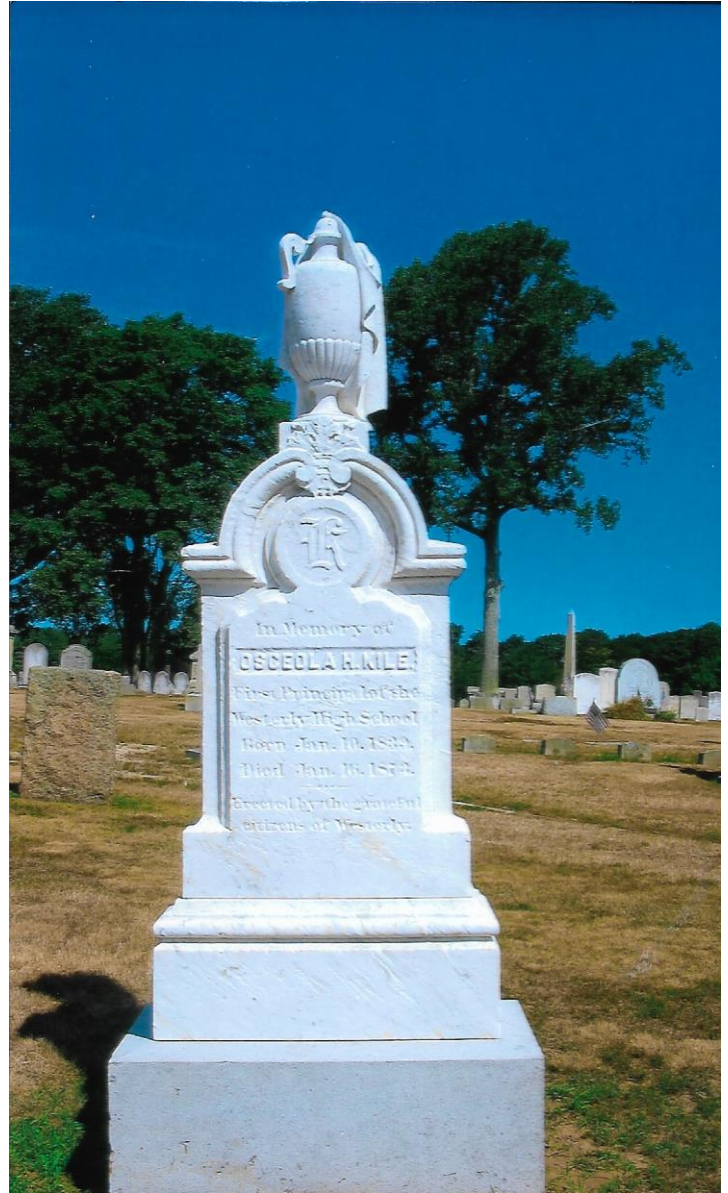
Remembering Osceola H. Kile

By Thomas O'Connell

BEFORE CLEANING



AFTER CLEANING



The Westerly Historical Society sincerely extends our sincere thanks and appreciation to Thomas O'Connell for his research and his efforts to work with the cemetery staff to have this monument cleaned.

The Westerly Historical Society sincerely extends our sincere thanks and appreciation to the Riverbend Cemetery Staff for working diligently to carefully clean and restore this important monument.

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