



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

March 2026

Westerly Historical Society Executive Board 2026

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Program Notes

“RESTORING OUR ELM STREET HOME” WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11TH, 6:30 PM

Please join us as Carly Callahan, discusses her family’s efforts to accurately restore the exterior of their 1840 Greek Revival home on Elm Street.

“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 LARCHMONT DISASTER”

Thank you to Daniel Harrington for his entertaining and informative presentation. It was well attended!
A very special thank you to our friends at the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association for co-sponsoring the event and providing refreshments.

TRIVIA QUESTION

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

When, Where, and By Whom was the Chief Ninigret statue in Watch Hill originally created and cast?

The answer is on the next page!

Bonus... How and why was Chief Ninigret a well-known part of the history of Watch Hill?

The answer is on pages 10 and 11!

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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.

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President's Corner

Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

Hello friends,

I'm certain that if you are like me, you are
plenty tired of digging out of the relentless
onslaught of snow!

I can assure you that the one thing your friends
here at the Westerly Historical Society never
tire of is digging up our town's great history.

I have recently met with a local collector of
bottles with local historical significance, and
we have added some neat additions to our
collection.

We now have soda bottles from Havens, Black
Rock, King and other local bottling companies
as well as pharmacy bottles from the Vars and
Price pharmacies and milk bottles from
Westerly Dairy and Consumers Dairy too!

If you know of or have any bottles or other
local business items from the past that could
possibly be donated to expand our collections,
please let me know!

Let's hope that our digging of snow will end
soon so we can invest more time in digging up
collectibles.

Be well friends,

Tom

EDITOR'S NOTES

Robert Peacock

***Thank you to
Jack Spratt***

for contributing an article this month.

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

TRIVIA ANSWER – *The statue was created by
Enid Yandell and cast by Alexis Rudner in Paris in
1914 before being delivered to Watch Hill as a gift.*

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A Day in the Life of Our Archivist

By Robert Peacock

On Friday, Dec 26, 2025 at 9:00 AM, a researcher preparing for a talk on historic structures designed by Architect James Sweeney emailed the below request to the Westerly Historical Society.

“I’ve been researching New London architect James Sweeney (1868-1919) and haven’t been able to locate two of the buildings in his obituary: Herman L. Dock residence at Westerly...” “I am pretty sure the Dock house was off Watch Hill Road. Built around 1910 and demolished around 1930. Do you know anyone who could help locate photos, info, etc?”

“Sweeney designed “hundreds” of buildings during his brief career... and several others in the Westerly area, including the above residences as well as the home of Judge John Sweeney, and the Watch Hill Yacht Club. I’ve been able to identify about 150 thus far. I know finding all of them might be impossible. However, the buildings listed in his obituary are his most significant and I would be remiss not locating all of them. Many thanks for any guidance you can provide, Maggie.”

At 9:19 AM, our President, Tom Gulluscio, forwarded it to our Archivist, Zack Garceau.

On Friday evening at 8:16 PM, less than 12 hours after the initial request, our very talented and highly capable archivist, Zack Garceau, responded.

“Hi Maggie,

As luck would have it, we have three photos in our collections labeled H. DOCK’S HOUSE WATCH HILL ROAD which are dated May 4, 1912. I have attached images of all three photos and their labels which have more detail about the location. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Best, Zack Garceau,

Archivist, Westerly Historical Society”



Item # 1985 - May 4, 1912 – H. Dock’s House. Watch Hill.



Item # 1984. - May 4, 1912 – H. Dock’s House. Watch Hill.



Item # 1986. - May 4, 1912 – H. Dock’s House. Watch Hill.

The house was located on Watch Hill Road, North of Mastuxet Cove, along the banks of the Pawcatuck River. Designed by James Sweeney and owned by Herman L. Dock, it was initially referred to as “H. Dock’s House” or simply “Dock’s House”, and was renamed “Sunnylands”, and was then later renamed “Villa Grande”.

We receive numerous requests like this each week and Zack works diligently to research and respond as quickly as possible. His hard work and dedication is vital to our mission!

WE APPRECIATE HIS EFFORTS!!!

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Announcements

CEMETERY CLEAN UP

In honor of the 250th Birthday of our nation, a small group including Jane Perkins, Bob Peacock, Dylan Harrington, and Larry Hunter cleared the leaves and weeds from the Westerly Historical Cemetery # 26, which is known as the Governor Samuel Ward Lot.

Here lies his wife, Anna Ward, and his daughter, Hanna Ward. Samuel Ward is buried in Newport.

Rhode Island Governor Samuel Ward was a member of the Continental Congress and would have been a signer of the declaration of Independence had he not died from smallpox before the it was signed.



BABCOCK SMITH HOUSE MUSEUM

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

March 8th at 2 PM Maureen Bjorkland will present "The Colonial Kitchen".

March 22nd at 2 PM Peter Piacquadio will present "Music of Early America".

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"

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!

The final Post Card in our collections sent from a father in Watch Hill to his daughter in Ohio depicting the Surf Men of the Watch Hill Life Saving Station as they conduct their weekly surf boat drills to maintain and improve their skills.

In the past few newsletters, we have shown three of the Post Cards in a series of eight depicting the weekly drills at the Watch Hill Life Saving Station. Each card contained a brief but loving message from a father, presumably visiting Watch Hill for several weeks of business, to his daughter and wife waiting for him back home. It appears that he sent all eight cards in the series. Unfortunately, we only have four of the eight cards in our collection.

A card postmarked and dated as August 26th of 1910 titled; “Launching Life Boat” was sent to Miss Isabel Helm of Cincinnati Ohio with the message *“My Dear Daughter, Hello Isabel. How are you? I am OK. Daddy is counting the days. Hope to see you and mother very soon. Love and Kisses to you and mother.*

A card postmarked and dated as August 30, 1910 titled; “Start of the Drill” was sent to Miss Isabel Helm of Cincinnati Ohio with the message *“My Dear Daughter, Hello Isabel. How did you enjoy the parade? Was it nice? Love and kisses to you and Mother. Daddy.*

A card postmarked and dated as September 11, 1910 titled; “Life Boat Righting Itself” was sent to Miss Isabel Helm of Cincinnati Ohio with the message *“My Dear Daughter, Hello Isabel. How are you? I’m OK but am feeling homesick to see you and Mother. Daddy*



This Post Card is postmarked and dated as September 13, 1910.

Titled; “Finish of the Capsizing Drill”

This card was sent to Miss Isabel Helm of Cincinnati Ohio with the message *“My Dear Daughter, Well Isabel, This is the last one of the set. How do you like them? Love and kisses to you and Mother. Daddy”*

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 # 030 – The Vars Lot

By Robert Peacock

There were reportedly fifty ancient burials in this cemetery which is approximately one hundred feet by fifty feet and contains many fieldstone grave markers as well as a large monument dedicated to the Vars Family. The most recent burial was prior to 1886 and the oldest burial is unknown.

Although records do not indicate the burial dates for any of the people interred here, the information documented by Frederic Denison in the 1860's, indicates that the remains of the following individuals are buried here:

Their Vars, who died at the age of 84, and his wife Molly.

Isaac Vars, who died at the age of 88, and his two wives, one of which was named Waity Vars.

Thomas Hall who was a veteran of the Revolutionary War.

The cemetery is bounded by six rough cut granite pillars and includes a large granite monument that reads "Erected by Nelson B. Vars in 1886 in memory of the first of the Vars family in America landed at Newport from France in 1680". The monolith shaped monument is almost eleven feet high and sits on a three foot by three foot square base.

There are at least 32 visible fieldstone markers scattered throughout the cemetery although most have sunken into the ground and are barely visible. However, many of the marker stones are still a few inches above the surface and are lined up in rows. They can be seen but only 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 "located in the northern portion of the town, about two hundred rods northwest from the residence of the late Elisha Saunders, and about the same distance east of the residence of William Burdick, Esq., on the side hill sloping west, in a pasture, and without enclosure." He noted "Here are fifty unlettered graves."

The cemetery is located on the Woody Hill Road side of Route 91 behind the homes located to the right of the Lacrosse Fields. It is approximately five hundred feet into the woods from Route 91 but requires walking approximately 3000 feet through the fields and paths of the Bradford Preserve to reach it.

To access the cemetery, park in the Lacrosse field lot and starting with your back to Route 91, walk towards the right back corner of the open fields. When you reach the right back corner of the field, look to your right and find the opening in the woods that leads to an approximately six foot wide walking and biking path.

Go in approximately 100 feet to where the path splits and take the path to the right which starts to lead back towards Route 91. Follow the path for approximately 1000 feet as the path curves to the left and runs parallel to Route 91 behind the houses. The path will then curve to the left and right several times before leading up a hill.

When you come to the spot where the path crosses through a break in a stone wall, look up the hill on the right side about one hundred feet in and you will barely see a tall granite monolith monument that is approximately eleven feet high. Continue up the path until it starts to curve to the left and you will find a small path between them that leads through the woods and into the cemetery.

For those using GPS, the cemetery is located at 41 degrees, 23 minutes, and 20.8 seconds North by 71 degrees, 45 minutes, and 20.3 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 includes a large granite monument that reads, "Erected by Nelson B. Vars in 1886 in memory of the first of the Vars family in America landed at Newport from France in 1680". The monument is almost eleven feet high and sits on a three foot by three foot square base.



There are at least 32 visible fieldstone markers scattered throughout the cemetery although most have sunken into the ground and are barely visible. However, many of the marker stones are still a few inches above the surface. They can be seen if you look very closely.



Of the 32 visible markers, most have sunken into the ground and are barely visible. However, many of the marker stones are still a few inches above the surface and many are lined up in rows. They can be discovered but only if you look very closely.

The following directions are much more detailed and should help in your search!

To access the cemetery, park in the Lacrosse field lot and starting with your back to Route 91, walk towards the right back corner of the open fields. (Alternatively, you can start walking on the paved walkway towards Westerly and then follow it as it turns to the left and continues along the right side of the field). When you reach the right back corner of the field, look to your right and find the opening in the woods that leads to an approximately six foot wide walking and biking path. You will see a small white sign with orange letters on a tree that reads “XC” as well as a small orange rectangle painted on the tree.

Go in approximately 100 feet to where the path splits and take the path to the right which starts to lead back towards Route 91. You will see a green sign with white letters on a tree that reads “XC Down”. Do not take the path that has a black sign with white letters on a tree that reads “Smashing Pumpkins”. I do not know where that path leads and I suspect that I do not want to find out. Follow the “XC Down” path for approximately 1000 feet as the path curves to the left and runs parallel to Route 91 behind the houses. You will come to a six-foot wide wooden foot bridge over a stream marked by a sign that reads “Matthew Walker 2018 WHS Senior Project”. Congratulations! You are two thirds of the way there! However, much of the remaining path is uphill.

The path will then curve to the left and right several times before leading up a hill. When you come to the spot where the path crosses through a break in a stone wall, look up the hill on the right side about one hundred feet in and you will barely see a tall granite monolith monument that is approximately eleven feet high. Continue up the path until it starts to curve to the left and you will find on the right side a large boulder and two large straight trees with a small path between them that leads through the woods and into the cemetery.

SPECIAL THANK YOU!

The cemetery was cleared a few years ago during Covid through the hard work and dedicated efforts of former Westerly Town Councilor Philip Overton and his wife. They spent several days cutting and removing several large fallen trees and clearing the dense heavy brush. Unfortunately, a dense layer of fallen leaves still covers many of the fieldstones and the brush and bull briars have already begun to return and reclaim the area.

An Armed Vessel at Watch Hill, 1665–1666

By Captain Jack Spratt

In the mid-17th century, long before Watch Hill became a summer haven, its windswept beaches were a strategic flashpoint in a bitter regional conflict.

From 1665 through the fall of 1666, the Connecticut Colony stationed a 30-foot armed vessel in Watch Hill Cove. Its mission: to prevent Chief Ninigret, sachem of the Eastern Niantic and leader of the Narragansetts, from launching war canoes from Napatree.

The goal was to halt raids against the Montaukett of eastern Long Island, led by Wyandanch, Ninigret's rival and Connecticut's ally.

Ninigret: Sachem, Strategist, Sovereign

Chief Ninigret, who died in 1677, was the most formidable Native leader in southern New England from the Pequot War (1636–37) through King Philip's War (1675–77).

For over four decades, he navigated a volatile world through a blend of warfare and diplomacy, preserving Narragansett autonomy amid growing colonial encroachment. His influence spanned:

- **Tribal diplomacy**, forging alliances from the Montaukett to the Mohawks.
- **Colonial negotiations**, engaging with Dutch and English colonies alike.
- **Royal appeals**, petitioning Kings Charles I and II directly.

Wyandanch and the Montaukett Revolt

Following the Pequot defeat in 1637, Montaukett sachem Wyandanch sought to end his people's tributary status to the Narragansett.

He allied with Connecticut and Uncas of the Mohegans, severing Ninigret's access to Long Island's prized wampum beds.

For Connecticut, this alliance was strategic: it disrupted Ninigret's ability to pay Mohawk mercenaries and negotiate with the Dutch.

War on the Water

From 1647 to 1666, Ninigret launched raids on Montaukett villages, often departing from Watch Hill and slipping through the breachway at Napatree.

The conflict escalated in 1653 when Wyandanch killed several of Ninigret's men on Block Island. Ninigret retaliated by attacking a Montaukett village and holding Wyandanch's daughter hostage for months.

In 1654, Wyandanch attempted a nighttime raid on Watch Hill. But Ninigret, forewarned, ambushed the Montaukett force along Napatree's shore. Nearly all were killed—a devastating blow to Montaukett resistance.

Editor's Note – A statue of "Chief Ninigret", created by Enid Yandell and cast by Alexis Rudner in Paris in 1914 was delivered to the United States and presented to the Watch Hill community. It was dedicated to the memory of Watch Hill resident, Clement A. Griscom

Article Continued on Next Page

An Armed Vessel at Watch Hill, 1665–1666

By Captain Jack Spratt

Wampum and Power

Eastern Long Island’s bays produced the finest Quahog shells (purple), and channeled Whelk (white) beads, the raw material for wampum.

The Montaukett homeland was known as Paumanok (“Land of Tribute”) and Sewanhacky (“Island of Shells”).

Wampum was more than currency—it was the lifeblood of Native diplomacy. Ninigret’s power depended on controlling this flow.

Connecticut’s intervention was as much about economic leverage as military defense.

Connecticut’s Naval Strategy

Connecticut’s concern over maritime threats was longstanding. In 1646, the New Haven Colony commissioned a Rhode Island boatbuilder to deliver a 150-ton armed vessel to protect commerce from Dutch and Native piracy—only to lose it somewhere off Watch Hill on its maiden voyage.

In 1647–48, Hartford and New Haven outfitted a ten-gun vessel with a forty-man crew to patrol Long Island Sound against “all other evil doers,” a phrase that included Native raiders.

By the 1660s, Ninigret’s diplomacy with the Dutch and native tribes posed as great a threat as any European rival.

The armed vessel at Watch Hill was a direct response—not a general patrol, but a blockade aimed at Ninigret’s war canoes.

A Forgotten Frontline

The deployment of Connecticut’s armed vessel in 1665–66 was a tactical move in a broader geopolitical struggle. By bottling up Ninigret’s forces at Napatree, the colony sought to protect its Montaukett allies, secure the wampum trade, and curb the influence of one of New England’s most formidable Native leaders.

Today, Watch Hill’s beaches are known for their beauty and leisure. But in the 17th century, they were a contested frontier — where colonial sloops and Narragansett war canoes clashed in the shadow of empire.



“Chief Ninigret” in his location looking out over Watch Hill Harbor towards Napatree Point.

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