



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

September 2026

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Program Notes

"THE LIFE OF A LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER" **WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9TH, 6:30 PM** **Carriage House, 124 Granite Street**

Please join us as Bob Peacock and Jane Perkins discuss how the responsibilities and duties of the Lighthouse Keepers have changed over the past two centuries. They will also share related artifacts from the Watch Hill Lighthouse Museum.
This program is being co-sponsored by our friends at the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association.

"RHODE ISLANDER'S REVOLUTIONARY ACTS OUTSIDE OF RHODE ISLAND" **SATURDAY, OCTOBER 17TH, 1 PM** **Westerly Library, 44 Broad Street**

This joint program with the Westerly 250th Committee, Babcock Smith House Museum, and Westerly Library will be held at the library and will feature a panel discussion of the contributions of Rhode Islanders to our Nation's Independence.

ANTIQUE CAR DISPLAY

The joint program with the Westerly Pawcatuck Antique Automobile Club has been cancelled and will be rescheduled.

SUMMER PROGRAMS

We had a busy summer with five special programs. Our appreciation is extended to Jack Spratt, Jean Gagnier, Betty Jo Cugini, Zack Garceau, Bob Peacock, and Jane Perkins for their efforts to present these interesting presentations.

TRIVIA QUESTION

Thank you to David Smith for providing this month's trivia question.

In 1894, there were seven banks in Westerly. Which of the following was NOT the name of a Westerly Bank in 1894? National Niantic Bank, Pawcatuck National Bank, Mechanics Savings Bank, or Niantic Savings Bank.

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, Welcome back!

Believe it or not I have a lot to share with you. Your
society didn't take a break this Summer as is typical.

After our annual meeting, which usually signals a well-
deserved hiatus, we hosted a Reflections reception at the
United Theater followed shortly after by our 4th summer
program at the Watch Hill Livery in the Chap Barnes
Reading Room with our friend Jack Spratt, our hosts the
Watch Hill Conservancy Team, and our as always
outstanding and generous friends and supporters, the
Brittons of Grey Sail Brewing,

I wish I could have captured that night in more than my
memories because I was unaware that it was going to be
the last time I was blessed with the presence of a truly
extraordinary man, this was the last night I would have
the pleasure to work with, to joke with, and to relish our
accomplishments with my friend Cory Jacobson. Cory
loved the potential of these community events to grow
our membership base, a task he took on with enthusiasm
and vigor. Cory would be pleased to know that a little
more than two weeks later, while still grieving his
insurmountable loss, Mary Jo and I put on brave faces
and hosted a program at the Weekapaug Inn which added
half a dozen new members.

Going into our Fall lineup, we all have added a new
aspect to the mission of the Society, we will continue to
serve you, our members, to the best of our ability and we
will always try to make Cory proud of our efforts and
accomplishments.

I sincerely look forward to seeing you soon and will
cherish that opportunity!

Tom

EDITOR'S NOTES

Robert Peacock

***Thank you to
Jane Perkins and Zachary Garceau
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 seven banks operating
in Westerly in 1894 did not include the Pawcatuck
National Bank.*

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Shipwrecks and Life Savers

By Jane Perkins

The Wreck of the Maggie Abbott

The 22 year old Tern Schooner named Maggie Abbott, traveling from New Brunswick in Canada to New York, struck the Watch Hill Reef between the spindle and the bell buoy on Friday, October 23th of 1896, around 5 o'clock in the morning.

According to an article in the Providence Journal, the vessel quickly began filling with water while remaining perched on top of the reef with her bow pointing to the Northwest as large waves came from the South and struck her from behind.

Her Captain reported that his ship had been forced off course by a tugboat with three barges in tow which was travelling through the narrow Watch Hill Passage at the same time. Captain Lunn alleged that he was forced to alter course to give the tug and her barges additional room and as a result, the schooner struck the reef.

The crew of the Watch Hill Life Saving Station immediately responded in the rough seas with Acting Captain Burdick in command. With much difficulty, they were finally able to take the crew of six men off the Maggie Abbott and bring them safely to shore.

Reaching the safety of shore and the Life Saving Station, Captain Lunn used the telephone to contact Captain Thomas A. Scott who responded from New London with a salvage vessel to assist.

Unfortunately, the rough seas made these efforts difficult and ultimately, the ship could not be saved and eventually sank off the coast of Watch Hill.

The Wreck of the Granville Bacon

The tern schooner Granville R. Bacon, carrying a cargo of coal, was inadvertently run up on the rocks a few miles East of Watch Hill on December 20th of 1933.

The captain reported he had mistaken a streetlight on shore as the light of an oncoming vessel and as he altered course, he accidentally ran the ship aground on the rocky shore near Weekapaug.

The captain and his crew were rescued by the combined efforts of the responding crews of Watch Hill and Quonochontaug Lifesaving Stations, whose surfmen ran several miles pulling their rescue carts loaded with ropes and rescue equipment to reach the scene which was approximately halfway between the two stations.

Multiple salvage efforts to refloat and rescue the vessel were unsuccessful. These efforts included unloading two hundred and forty large bags of coal onto the beach to lighten the weight of the ship. Local newspaper accounts indicate that all of this coal disappeared overnight! Locals were blamed, but the thefts could not be proven. The masts, rigging, and other equipment were later removed and salvaged while the remaining hull was left in the ocean and attracted a steady stream of visitors coming to see the wreck.

Weekapaug residents, apparently upset and angry that these visitors were disturbing their peace, purchased the rights to the remains of the wreck, and then intentionally burned it to the waterline in April of 1934 after several attempts.

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Announcements

**IN LOVING MEMORY OF OUR FRIEND
CORY JACOBSON**

Our friend and fellow Board member passed away suddenly this summer. We are devastated by his death at such a young age, and we offer our comfort and support to his family during this difficult time.

WATCH HILL LIGHTHOUSE MUSEUM

Our friends at the Watch Hill Lighthouse Museum would like to extend an invitation to our "local" residents, including members of the Westerly Historical Society, to visit the museum this month before they close for the winter.

The museum will be open for this special event on Saturday, September 12th from 4 PM to 7 PM.

During this special event, visitors will be allowed to drive down the private road and check out the newly expanded and renovated museum.

If the weather permits, you may even be able to enjoy a spectacular sunset around 7 PM as well!

BABCOCK SMITH HOUSE MUSEUM

Our friends at the Babcock Smith House Museum are offering the following in the Carriage House.

September 13th at 2 PM Lawrence Erhart will present
"Early Currency in Our Area"

October 3rd at 2 PM Bob Ward will preside over the
Babcock Smith House Museum Auction
The preview is at 1 PM and the auction is at 2 PM.

October 11th at 2 PM Hugh Barton will present
**"Dear Friend: Franklin and Babcock
Correspondence"**

November 8th at 2 PM Vito DiPaola will present
**"World War II Remembered: Westerly's Greatest
Generation in Their Own Words"**

December 5th at 9 AM Museum will be open for their
Annual Holiday Open House
featuring sales of handmade items, cookie platters,
and raffle baskets as well as free refreshments.

**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!

Hurricane Carol made landfall in Rhode Island on August 31st of 1954.

Carl and Peggy Green donated this slide which shows the aftermath of Hurricane Carol and a United States Coast Guard Boat which was ripped away from a dock in Watch Hill Harbor at the height of the storm and later washed ashore near the tip of Napatree Point.



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

In Memory of Our Friend Cory Jacobson

By Zachary Garceau



This summer, the Westerly Historical Society lost Cory Jacobson, a devoted board member who served for many years as our dedicated and passionate membership chair.

However, Cory was much more than a board member, he was also a very dear friend of mine. My friendship with Cory predates his service with the Society, as we first met in 2018 when my wife and I purchased the house next door to Cory, his wife, Justine, and their two boys, Andrew and Liam.

Over the last eight years, we spent countless holidays, birthdays, graduations, and every other occasion with the Jacobsons and if there was one thing Cory loved, it was a reason to celebrate.

Cory was the hardest working person I have ever met. Despite working third shift at Electric Boat for many years, he always found time to attend every event his sons, Andrew and Liam, participated in. For those who don't know Andrew and Liam, they are both talented athletes who played every sport you can think of, which meant Cory spent a lot of time driving all over Rhode Island to attend games, tournaments, and banquets, and still, he somehow found time to serve the Society by attending board meetings, knocking on doors looking for sponsors and trying to grow our membership numbers.

In fact, on multiple occasions, I would be sitting outside with Cory having a drink and watching the Red Sox game and he would tell me "I really think we can get to 250 members this year. I just need to find a way to reach more people." I would just sit there in amazement because I had no idea where he would find the time, but I am starting to think he knew something we all don't and for Cory there really were more than 24 hours in a day.

In addition to all of his seemingly dozens of other roles, Cory was also a devoted husband to his wife, Justine. Cory and Justine were there for so many important memories over the last eight years. When we brought our son, Hank, home earlier this year, Cory, Justine and Liam were the first people to visit and to hold him.

I know Cory had every intention of making Hank the Society's youngest member and I can only assume he had an application ready to go the moment we told him that we were bringing our baby home.

Cory was so proud of his boys, a fact that was apparent to anyone who talked to him for more than two minutes. I lost count of the number of times I was outside mowing the lawn or swimming in the pool in my backyard and Cory would wave and yell “Liam went 2 for 4 today with a double and an RBI!” to me.

I’ll always remember how happy he was during our annual dinner in May 2025, which happened to coincide with Andrew’s final game for the Westerly Bulldogs baseball team. For this game, Liam was called up from the Junior Varsity team, and he took the field with Andrew for the first time. In between selling tickets and checking guests in at the Haversham, he would check the score and provide me with periodic updates.

On multiple occasions, I told Cory and Justine that I hope my children turn out like their boys, because they did an amazing job as parents and you can tell they learned so much from them. While Cory’s pride in his family was clear to anyone who knew him, so was his pride in Westerly and its history. The last time I saw Cory was on the Fourth of July standing on the Town Hall steps when we were asked to participate in the reading of the Declaration of Independence. Well, I was asked, anyways.

When I shared the news of Cory’s passing with Jim Wolfe, who had arranged the event, he told me how Cory was the only person to reach out to him personally to ask to be a reader. I could only laugh because, to anyone that knew Cory, that would have been the least surprising thing.

Cory’s enthusiasm was contagious. Countless times I would tell my wife, Anna, that I was just going next door to watch the ninth inning of the Red Sox game and I would be back in ten minutes. Over an hour later, I would come home after watching the end of three other games I didn’t really care about, having had a great time.

Speaking of enthusiasm, Cory is the only person I have ever known who was excited to turn fifty years old. He had so much planned leading up to his 50th birthday this October. Over the last several years, Cory developed a number of lists ranking his favorite things that he kept in a special binder. The one that he talked about most was his top 500 songs list. To celebrate his 50th birthday, he made a playlist of those 500 songs that he would play at the parties he had planned throughout the year. Sadly, we never got all the way up to #1, but I know he’s up there telling everyone about his prized list.

He packed so much life into his forty-nine years, that it would be unbelievable for any other person. This was clear to anyone who attended his wake because the line was out the door and around the block. The number of lives he touched in such a tragically short amount of time is simply amazing.

The last time we were at his house, Cory told us the entire history of the Misquamicut Surf Rescue, of which he was a proud former member. What I wouldn’t give to go back and hear that story one more time.

To Cory, thank you for everything, you will truly be missed!

I would like to end this story with remembrances from a few other board members who have recently shared fond memories of Cory.

“As one of the newest members of the Westerly Historical Society's Executive Board, I remember Cory's natural warmth in making me feel welcomed. His experience and responsibility within the Society was vast, yet he immediately treated me like a trusted colleague, not a rookie. Given his enthusiasm for sports, this came natural to him! When I saw the phenomenal outpouring of love for Cory and his family, I realized his ability to connect was not a singular action with me, but with the entire community of Westerly. He strove to preserve memories of his beloved town by serving on the Westerly Historical Society board but he, in turn, was the one who provided so many memories for all of us.”

– Mary Jo Girard, Board Member

“Cory and I joined the historical society board at the same time. We had a tradition of staffing the check in table at each year's annual meeting. It was our time to share a beer and catch up on life. Cory loved his boys and would talk about their achievements. He had an unbelievable amount of energy and enthusiasm. The last time I saw him was at the July 4th time capsule ceremony and we texted a day or two later about how hot it was sitting on the steps of town hall. He was a good man who loved his town and his family.”

– Bob Boucher, Board Member

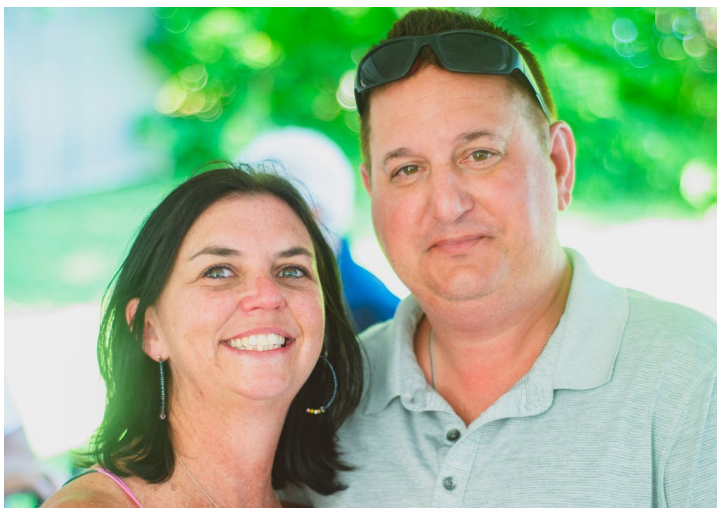
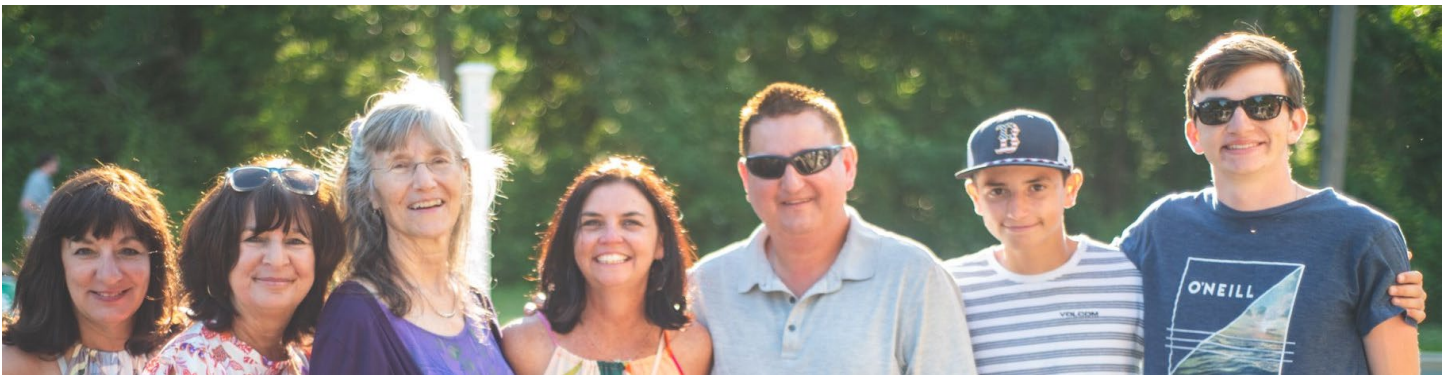
“Cory was such an incredible person. He was filled with spirit, with passion, and with love. He brought joy to so many and he was always the first to step in to brighten a friend's day simply by smiling and asking, “How are you doing?” He loved his family and he valued his friends! Cory will be missed by so many!”

– Bob Peacock, Board Member

“I met Cory through the society's Vice President and Archivist, Zack Garceau. Zack and his wife, Anna, had already proven to be great friends and assets to the WHS. Cory was interested in serving on the board and quickly signed up, A trait I would come to recognize as typical behavior for my new friend. Cory rarely missed a meeting or event despite being a very busy man with work and family obligations. My personal rule is family first and I was not disappointed to watch Cory continuously be there for his parents, his beautiful wife, Justine, and two fine boys. When Cory volunteered to be our membership chairperson, he made it a personal challenge to increase our membership rolls, to increase our sponsorship members, and to work with me to achieve our expectations.”

“When speaking with Cory, it was impossible not to detect a powerful enthusiasm behind every spoken word. He was truly excited with everything we talked about and planned to do for the benefit of the Society. People come and go from our lives more often than we are prepared for and Cory's sudden departure has been very difficult to process. One thing is abundantly clear though: Cory unknowingly left behind a strong spirit of commitment to service and love for his friends that is sure to never fade or be forgotten. Rest in peace my good friend, we will take it from here and I promise you we will make you proud!”

- Tom Gulluscio, President



Watch Hill Life Saving Station History

By Robert Peacock

The Watch Hill Life Saving Station Routines

The Watch Hill Life Saving Station was established in 1879 on Watch Hill Point just north of the Watch Hill Lighthouse.

The Station Keeper, also called the Station Captain, lived at the station all year with his family while the surfmen were only hired to work the “rescue season” which generally ran from September through May.

The crew of eight men generally lived at the station in military like conditions and were only provided with two days off from duty each week. The work was both monotonous and exhilarating while the pay was low, and the labor was hard.

Most surfmen farmed or worked other jobs in the off season to make ends meet. The surfmen were paid \$65 per month and worked long hours. Yet they were brave and proud men with incredible dedication and a passion for the sea.

The work was at times very difficult. Their days and nights were heavily structured around cleaning and maintenance, daily training and drills, and nightly patrols along the shore or in the watch tower.

The Station Keeper had much responsibility, and their positions required sound judgement and unflinching courage. They were highly trained and were able to command the utmost respect and obedience of the surf men under the most difficult and laborious conditions.

While somewhat relaxing in the spring and summer, Watch Hill before the turn of the last century has been described as a cold, dismal, dreary, and empty place in the fall and winter. The working and living conditions for the surf men were very difficult.

Surf Men Nightly Beach Patrols

The local beaches were patrolled each night by surfmen of the Watch Hill Lifesaving Station, from Napatree Point to Pleasant View, (now called Misquamicut) all night long. The watches were every four hours and included shifts from 4 PM to 8 PM, then 8 PM to Midnight, then Midnight to 4 AM, and then 4 AM to 8 AM.

At all times, overnight in the winter season, there would be a surfman patrolling the shore to the East of the Station, a surfman patrolling on the shore to the West of the Station, and a surf man scanning from the watch tower.

They each carried a whistle, a time clock, a post key, a red lantern, and a “Coston Signal” which was a bright red flare which could be used to attract the attention of the other surfmen. They were tasked with searching for people and/or vessels in distress on the shoreline and in the ocean.

At the end of Napatree Point and in front of the cottage of John Berry in Pleasant View were tall wooden posts with a small iron safe mounted near the top. The surf man carried a post key which opened the safe and a key inside the safe was then used to activate the time clock. The key registered the time inside the clock which verified the surf man’s actions.

With the thermometer often below freezing, the dark beach lined with ice and other hidden hazards, and the strong wind and high surf continually soaking them, the men often had difficulty completing the two and a half mile trips in the appointed time.

As soon as one man returned from a patrol, the next man would head out into the darkness.

William Franklin Saunders

By Robert Peacock

William Franklin Saunders was one of the first surfmen assigned to the new Watch Hill Life Saving Station in 1879.

He was born in his parent's home on Woody Hill Road in Bradford on October 14, 1848. His parents were Charles and Sally Stanton Saunders. He married Alzada A. Langworthy and they had a son, Albert L. Saunders, and a daughter, Carrie L. Saunders.

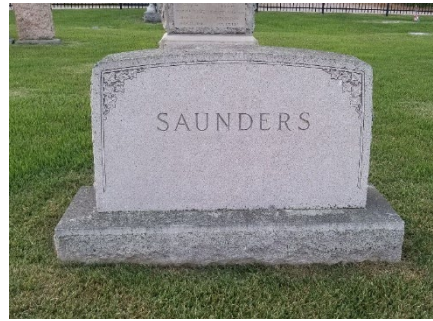
The early part of his life was spent working on a farm until he was hired in 1879, at the age of 31, to work as a surfman at The Watch Hill Life Saving Station. At the age of 44, he was promoted and became the first Captain of the Quonochontaug Life Saving Station which opened in 1892.

At the age of 53, in 1901, he retired from government service stating in his resignation that he was leaving "that the service might have an abler man to perform its arduous duties."

Following his retirement, Captain Saunders operated his farm "The Winnapaug" near Noyes Beach on Shore Road in Westerly. He passed away at the age of 78 and is buried in the Riverbend Cemetery.



Image of William Saunders courtesy of the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association and the Watch Hill Lighthouse Museum.



His obituary from the "The Sabbath Recorder", Vol 103, No 16, p 511, is reprinted below as it is transcribed on the website www.findagrave.com.

In Westerly, R. I., August 1, 1927, Captain Wm. F. Saunders in the seventy-ninth year of his age. He was born in Westerly October 14, 1848. and was the son of Charles and Sally Stanton Saunders.

The early part of his life was spent on a farm until he entered the employ of the government as a member of the coast guard, at the Watch Hill station, from which he was transferred to the station at Quonochontaug, where he was captain for nine years. He retired from that position some years ago, since which time he has lived on his farm on the Shore Road.

Captain Saunders confessed Christ, was baptized, and became a member of the First Westerly Church, at Dunn's Corners, many years ago, retaining his membership there until May 22, 1908, when he, with others of his family, united by letter with the Pawcatuck Seventh Day Baptist Church of Westerly, where his membership has since been. He was a member of different Masonic orders, and also of the Westerly Grange. His wife, Alzada A. Langworthy, preceded him some six years in death.

He is survived by one son, Albert L. Saunders, of Boston, Mass.; and one daughter, Carrie L. Saunders, of Westerly; one brother, James A. Saunders, of Westerly; and four sisters, Mrs. Lydia Chase, of Saylesville; Mrs. Hazel Larkin, of Bradford; Mrs. Lucy Lucker, of Norwich, Conn.; and Mrs. William Holberton of Shannock; also three granddaughters of Boston.

Captain Saunders, having lived so long in Westerly, had a host of acquaintances and friends, and was noted for his genial manners with all. He had been in failing health for some time and passed away very peacefully at his home here, where he had lived so many years. Farewell services, conducted by his pastor, Clayton A. Burdick, were held from his late home on the Shore Road, August 3, 1927.

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