



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

November-December 2013

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EDITOR'S CORNER

Ann L. Smith

Every so often we get caught up in a story or a period of time that just will not let us go. Researching a topic or a particular time period has a way of drawing us in to the point where we want to know every detail. The uncovering of facts leads to more questions. When we answer those, there are still more; and on it goes.

I must confess that I did not always have a passion for history. Nor am I a native of this area. But there is something intriguing about knowing what went on here before we existed. Walking the same streets as Ansel Bourne (see "The Strange (and Miraculous?) Case of Ansel Bourne," page 3) or reading the list of tunes in the library's old Swiss music box (see "Holiday Time in Westerly," page 2) has a way of pulling us into the past. We can't help but imagine the scenes described in the old accounts: the Sunday meetings at the Christian Chapel (now the Granite Theater) or children rapt by a Christmas fairytale at the Westerly Library.

We hope you enjoy this holiday issue of *Westerly's Witness*. On behalf of all of us, Peace! Shalom!

Calendar of Events

(The Westerly Historical Society is currently working on the events calendar for 2014. There will be no program during the month of December. We invite you to enjoy the following events sponsored by the Babcock-Smith House Museum.)

Christmas Bazaar

Saturday, December 7, 2013, 9 am - 1 pm

Come do your Christmas shopping for gifts for someone else or for yourself. Greens, gently-used Christmas-related items, collectibles and cookies!

A Celebration of Trees

December 8-15 (closed Tuesday)

Sundays (2-5pm) Monday (4-7pm)
Wednesday (4-8pm) Thursday and Friday (4-7pm)
Saturday (2-5pm)

Each room of the historic home will feature trees each decorated with a different theme. There will also be handmade decorations for sale and special events during the week.

Members: FREE; non-members \$10.00
Children 5-12 \$3.00.

Lincoln, Rhode Island and the War in 1863

Sunday, January 5, 2014, 2:00 pm

Former Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, Frank Williams, will speak about Rhode Island's connection with Lincoln and the Civil War in 1863.

At the Carriage House, 124 Granite St, Westerly

Non-members \$2.00; members free.

<http://www.babcock-smithhouse.com/>

Holiday Time In Westerly

Ann L. Smith

Nothing signals the start of the holiday season more than the annual Westerly-Stonington High School football game. Usually preceded by a pep-rally on the Westerly Post Office steps the night before, this year's game will mark the 102nd time that these two teams have faced off. For the players, their families, and their coaches, this tradition runs deep. Bob Mitchell, for example, is a lifelong Westerly resident and played with the Bulldogs in the early 1970's. His son Adam recently played halfback for Westerly from 2010 through 2012 and proudly wore his father's number 24 during his entire three years on the varsity team. A little-known fact is that the Bulldogs played against college teams in the years before the Stonington match-ups began.

Another Westerly tradition is the annual Christmas concert by the Westerly Band. One of the earliest Christmas concerts given by this group was held on December 21, 1854 at the Union Meeting House. The musical performance was preceded by selected recitations offered by the Westerly High School students. The director was Charles O. Gavitt. Folks who would like to hear this year's concert should save the date of December 8. More information about the concert as well as some history of the Westerly Band can be found at <http://westerlyband-gov.doodlekit.com/>

A much newer musical group, by comparison, is the Chorus of Westerly. Founded in 1959 under the direction of George Kent, the Chorus of Westerly has delighted the town for decades with its concerts at holiday time and throughout the year. In recent times the Twelfth Night

performances have become this group's premier holiday event, but many older folks remember the excellent performances of decades past put on by this outstanding group.

Downtown Westerly was always the center of activity in the mid- 1900's at Christmastime. Children skated on the pond in Wilcox Park and the Westerly Library held story hour every day from 4-5 P.M. According to the library's annual reports, the story hours during Christmas week were a "boon" to parents who hurried to finish their shopping while the children were entertained. Each day the old Swiss music box pealed forth Christmas carols and children were not the only ones who paused to listen. Many an older person stood entranced recalling the days when they had "begged Mr. Kennedy to play just one more." The old Swiss music box received a thorough cleaning and overhaul in 1949 and today occupies a niche in the corridor of the library's second floor.

The library always put on Christmas-themed exhibits each December. Two notable exhibits were, "Christmas Then and Now," and "Toys of Yesterday." The latter was such a hit when it ran in 1954 that it was held over into January, 1955 by popular demand.

One year the students from Westerly were invited to the library to give repeat performances of their school Christmas pageants. This was done so that pupils of the area's elementary schools could regale one another with the performances that

they would have otherwise missed.

There was also an account of some carolers who suddenly appeared at the doorway of the reading room one year and burst into song just as the children's story hour was ending.

Aside from the library, another big attraction for children at Christmas was "Toy Land" on the third floor of McCormick's Department Store. Although Santa Claus was not always on hand, children delighted in visiting this wonderland with a seemingly endless display of things to be wished for.

Across from McCormick's was W.T. Grant's Five and Dime. Here children could buy modest gifts for their family members (if they had smartly saved their allowances) and look at the latest in bubble lights, snow globes, and spun-glass angel hair. The Grant's store eventually became a McCrory's Five and Dime and is occupied today by Miceli's Furniture.

With so much activity surrounding Christmas, non-Jews sometimes forget that one of New England's oldest temples is right here in Westerly. Congregation Sharah Zedek has been celebrating the Jewish faith, including Hanukkah, in our area since 1908. The current synagogue building at 6 Union Street was originally constructed as an Episcopal church in the late 19th century, then sold to the Ancient Order of Hibernians in 1903. The building was purchased by Congregation Sharah Zedek in 1917 and this congregation has remained an active and thriving part of our community.

The Strange (and Miraculous?) Case of Ansel Bourne

Ann L. Smith

Ansel Bourne was born in New York City in 1826. He was the son of Thomas Bourne of Sandwich, Massachusetts and Betsy Green of Warwick, Rhode Island. The youngest of three, he lost his father at the tender age of seven. His family moved several times and he eventually became a carpenter's apprentice under the tutelage of George J. Harris of Olneyville (Providence).

Upon reaching the age of eighteen, Bourne left the care of Mr. Harris and married Sarah A. Woodmansee of Richmond. The couple settled in Providence for a time and by 1846 were living in Cranston in a house that Ansel himself had built. Shortly thereafter they were swindled out of their beloved home by a person who professed to be a pious man. Not only was Ansel embittered by the lack of humanity among men, he developed an intense dislike for people who claimed to preach the word of God.

In time Ansel's idea of religion softened somewhat and he became interested in the Free Will Baptist Church at Pawtuxet. Even so, he was convinced that he could live a Christian life without actually having to unite with any particular congregation. As time passed, he witnessed several misdeeds among the church's members, and without a broad understanding of the meaning of charity, he eventually became an atheist.

The account of Bourne's religious experiences tells us that this conversion to atheism was a gradual process and one with which he struggled mightily. For nearly an entire year he contemplated the existence of God until he had finally decided that, "There is no God." This he kept to himself. He shared it with no one, not even his wife. Ansel concluded that if God wanted him to believe, he would show him some sign. He knew if he only had a sign, then he would certainly believe. Absent of that, Ansel Bourne continued contentedly for ten years in his atheism.

Ansel and his wife had two small children by 1857 and had settled in Westerly, about a mile south of downtown. He bore a keen hatred for churches, ministers, and any religious professors whose acquaintance he should happen to make. In the fall of 1857 he had been out of work due to a brief illness. When he felt better, he decided to walk to town on October 28 to make arrangements for transportation to South Kingstown, where he would resume working on some new homes that were being built. He said goodbye to his wife and three-year-old daughter Melissa, then set out upon his way.

As he approached town a random thought that he should go to the Christian Chapel came to him. Thinking to himself he asked, "What? I would sooner be struck deaf

and dumb forever than to go there." After walking on a short distance he felt dizzy and sat down on a flat stone. It is reported that he then experienced a strange feeling as if "some powerful hand drew something down over his head and then over his face, and finally over his whole body; depriving him of his sight, his hearing and his speech; and rendering him perfectly helpless."

Although he was deprived of his senses, Ansel Bourne retained his clarity of thought. He recalled his decision of some ten years earlier that if God existed, he would show him a sign. And now having uttered his preference to be deaf and dumb over going to chapel it seems as if God had taken Ansel at his word. And not to be misunderstood, Mr. Bourne received a dose of blindness for good measure.



The next thought Bourne had was, "There IS a God!" A thousand things raced through his mind but he could not utter a single word. Within moments he felt himself being carried away, put into a wagon and taken to what he supposed was his home. Mr. Bourne's personal physician, Dr. William T. Thurston, was called for immediately and examined him. The doctor found him to be "perfectly insensible," not having responded to light or sound of any kind. Into the night and all the next day Bourne "read over the history of his life." He was alone in his dark, silent universe; shut out from the world, save for the loving caresses of his two small children who occasionally clambered up onto his bed.

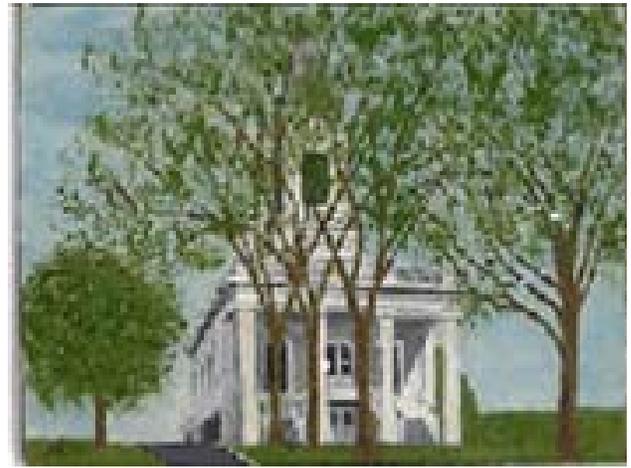
Late in the afternoon of that second day, Ansel's vision suddenly returned just as spontaneously as it had left him. He saw his wife Sarah standing at the foot of his bed talking with a neighbor. They seemed not to know that he was deaf, so Bourne made a writing motion on his palm. Sarah brought in some paper and a pen with which he proceeded to write that he could not hear or speak. With this, a flood of tears overtook his poor wife.

(continued on page 4)

Ansel Bourne (continued from page 3)

In the days that followed Ansel called for his neighbor, the Reverend John Taylor, and a previously despised acquaintance, Mr. Joshua Thompson, Jr. He asked for forgiveness from them by writing on a slate as he did for everyone else who came to visit. Bourne's intense hatred for anything religious had turned into a passion to be closer to God. He frequented the Christian Chapel as well as the Baptist churches in town. Although he could not hear, Reverend Taylor allowed him to have his messages read from the pulpit.

On Sunday, November 15, 1857, Reverend Taylor agreed to read another of Bourne's exhortations at the end of the morning's service. As the reverend finished reading, Bourne stood with his hands stretched up to the heavens. Feeling happy, he then gave one loud (but silent) clap after which he continued standing with his arms stretched up above his head. At that very moment, Mr. Bourne's hearing and speech were completely restored. The mouths that had been silently moving in prayer now could be heard as clear as day. Ansel immediately fell to his knees and praised God with "a soft, clear tone of voice." The whole congregation, it is said, "wept openly with tears of joy."



In 1876 the Christian Chapel at Westerly was renamed "The Broad Street Christian Church." It is unclear if the rebuilding of this church occurred before or after the name was changed. Shown above is the newer building. Except for the absence of the steeple, the site today remains basically the same.



Artist's rendering of the "Christian Chapel at Westerly." Built in 1849 and located at 1 Granite Street, the chapel was razed and rebuilt in a similar fashion some years later. Designed in the Greek revival style, the newer building was put up with the columns that we are familiar with today. The steeple, however, was destroyed in the hurricane of 1938 and not rebuilt. The location is now the home of the Granite Theater.

Ansel Bourne went on to be an evangelical preacher. The stone upon which he first sat was moved to his

front yard some time later at his request. He kept it as a memento of his experience and as a reminder of the "stroke of the Almighty upon him."

Did Ansel Bourne suffer from some form of hysteria or did a miracle occur at the Christian Chapel? We will leave the reader to his or her own devices regarding this matter. Either way, it may be said that the life of at least one individual was entirely changed for the better by the events that took place here in the fall of 1857.



The etching of Ansel Bourne shown on page 3 was engraved by Brightly, Waters & Company of New York.

The paintings of the Christian Chapel and Granite Theater building can be viewed at

<http://www.granitetheatre.com/index.php/our-history>

The primary source of information for this article is *Wonderful Works of God. A Narrative of the Wonderful Acts in the Case of Ansel Bourne of Westerly, Rhode Island.* Published by Moses Cummings, Office of the Christian Messenger, Irvington, NJ, 1858. E-book available at

<http://google.com/books?id=5nUXAAAAYAAJ>

Coming in January: "Ansel Bourne, The Later Years."

Lime Kiln Burn at the Pendleton-Chapman Farm House



What do you get when you combine 3,500 pounds of clam and oyster shells, ten cords of wood, and a bunch of pilgrims? A lime-kiln burn! On November 2-3, 2013 Brian Cooper of Early New England Restorations LLC manufactured lime from seashells using the old colonial method of burning them for twenty-four hours. Instructed by the artisans of Colonial Williamsburg, VA, this event is believed to have been the first authentic lime-kiln burn in Rhode Island in over 100 years. The finished product will be used in making plaster for the ongoing restoration of the Pendleton-Chapman farmhouse.

Do You Have a Knack for PR?

We are looking for someone to write a piece for publication (to be submitted to the *Westerly Sun*, the *SO RI Magazine*, and *Westerly Life*) on the 100th anniversary of our Society, and the upcoming programs we are planning for Spring 2014.

If you can write an occasional article for us, please contact: Pamela Scott, Program Director, Westerly Historical Society, (401) 741-8705

RESEARCH REQUESTS

Quite often we receive requests from individuals across the country seeking information about their ancestors. Thankfully the Westerly Historical Society board is always up to the challenge of providing information on even the most obscure details of Westerly's past.

Our most recent request came from Fran Milliken of West Suffield, CT who was seeking information on the wreck of the *Clio Chilcott*. Fran, it seems, is working on his family history as a gift to his grandchildren. Dwight Brown, our resident expert on shipwrecks, provided two pages of information taken from his personal research on this subject. We wish to thank Dwight for his years of dedication to historical research. His work on shipwrecks and, together with his wife Anna, his documentation of local graves has preserved valuable information for many of our future generations.

Here are some quick facts about the wreck of the *Clio Chilcott*:

The schooner *Clio Chilcott* of Ellsworth, Maine (pictured below) was driven ashore about two miles east of Watch Hill on Saturday evening, January 9, 1886 in a violent gale and snowstorm. The captain, E. L. Fullerton and one crew member were rescued by the lifesaving crew at Watch Hill. A third crew member was washed overboard and drowned. The cargo was rough granite and had been assigned to M.H. St. John of New York. The following day, some of the rigging was as well as the hauser used by the life saving crew was stolen. The cargo was eventually sold to the Smith Granite Company of Westerly and the rigging, spars and other materials from the vessel were sold at auction on February 4, 1886.



THE SCHOONER CLIO CHILCOTT

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



The Westerly Historical Society
P.O. Box 91
Westerly, RI 02891

Babcock-Smith House Museum Notes

The latest tour was given to the Colonial Dames of Rhode Island. The Colonial Dames is a national organization whose members trace their ancestors as having arrived on American soil prior to 1750.

Feedback after the museum tour was quite positive. There was a high level of interest in the ongoing capital campaign for the expansion of our carriage house. With no permanent meeting space of their own, the Colonial Dames of Rhode Island were captivated with the idea that building a structure such as the Babcock-Smith carriage house would be a worthwhile undertaking.

The Colonial Dames of Rhode Island operate the Governor Stephen Hopkins House in Providence. It is on the National Register of Historic Places. We hope to see all the Colonial Dames again next year!

Membership News

By now members should have received their annual membership renewal notices. If you have not already done so, please return your payment with the envelope provided as soon as possible.

If you have questions about your membership, need to update your information or would like to join the Westerly Historical Society, please contact Lise Mayers, Membership Chairperson at whsmembership@gmail.com.

Westerly's Witness E-Paper

If you would like to receive an email and password to alert you each time a new issue of *Westerly's Witness* is available online, simply respond to whssecretary@gmail.com, and we will add your email address to our e-newsletter mailing list. Please let us know if you would also like to suspend your paper mailings of *Westerly's Witness* when you write. Remember, going paperless saves a tree!