



Westerly's Witness

September 2014

Westerly Historical Society Officers 2014-2015

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Babcock-Smith House Museum Liaison Edward A. Fazio	

Calendar of Events October 5, 2014



David J. Silverman and Julie A. Fisher
Co-authors of

*Ninigret, Sachem of the Niantics and
Narragansetts: Diplomacy, War, and the
Balance of Power in Seventeenth-Century
New England and Indian Country*

Julie A. Fisher is an advanced graduate
student in history at the University of
Delaware. (Continued in next column.)

Calendar of Events- Continued

David J. Silverman is Professor of History
at George Washington University and the
author of *Red Brethren: The Brothertown
and Stockbridge Indians and the Problem of
Race in Early America* (2010) and *Faith and
Boundaries: Colonists, Christianity, and
Community among the Wampanoag Indians
of Martha's Vineyard, 1600-1871* (2005).

November 2, 2014

Associate Professor

Sarina R. Rodrigues,

Special Collections Librarian, will give a
talk on local history and doing
research with the special collections at the
University of Rhode Island.

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Programs are held in the  
carriage house of the  
Babcock-Smith House Museum  
124 Granite Street  
Westerly, RI

Sundays at 2:00 PM  
Free & open to the public.

Coming Soon:

Julie Nathanson from the Pawtuxet Valley  
Historical Society and Cemetery  
Commission will speak about her work on  
the RI Cemeteries database and the related  
transcription project

Details to follow next month!

# Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

Here it is September again and I wondered if I shouldn't do yet another piece about the 1938 Hurricane (September 21 is the anniversary). So much has been written and there are many experts on the topic in the immediate region. Even more are the many septuagenarians (and older) among us who carry their stories in their hearts.

Many remember R.A. (Rita) Scotti's book *Sudden Sea: The Great Hurricane of 1938* which came out in 2003. I had the pleasure of listening to her lecture that year at the Westerly Library. We had once thought that the Westerly Historical Society would like to invite Rita back to give another talk, but sadly, Rita went to her reward in February 2010.

The other iconic book on this topic is *A Wind to Shake the World: The Story of the 1938 Hurricane* by Everett S. Allen and there are several other good ones to be found. In addition, the PBS special "The Hurricane of '38" which aired as part of *The American Experience* series recently has been well received. The complete transcript of that broadcast can be found at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/transcript/hurricane-transcript/>

Many of us have heard the Moore sisters' account of how theirs was the last cottage on Napatree Point to be swept away. Most are familiar with the sad story of the Jamestown school bus that was engulfed in the tidal wave. Only one of the eight small children and the driver, Norman Caswell, survived. I have personally read many articles about this horrific event, and my husband (God rest his soul) had his personal story that he always shared. (Some have said that a child could not possibly remember floating away in the family cottage on Benson Avenue when not even two years old, but Herb swore he remembered. The water was up to the attic before they were rescued in Mr. Green's rowboat, so the story goes.) There is a picture somewhere in our archives of a house half-submerged in Winnapaug Pond. This may very likely be the Smith's cottage after the storm. The house was later moved to Crandall Avenue and is still in use today.

I have read more than one account of the eerie yellow skies, the glass window panes bulging in and out, and of slate roof tiles flying through the air and of bodies found completely naked, their clothes having been torn off by the ferocious winds.

In Providence the scene was more like a bad disaster movie than anything out of real life. "[A] rat floated down Main Street, bobbing on an empty gasoline can. Living-room furniture, office desks, restaurant tables, a biblical tide of struggling people and everyday objects swirled down Main Street." (James Dodson, writing for *Yankee*, September 1988.)

I had read that the Westerly Sun published a paper within a couple of days after the storm. I wondered how it was possible if the power was off all over the state. According to *Yankee Magazine*, the paper was produced on an antique hand press. The death toll was updated daily and approximately 100 lives were lost. The old high school, which stood next to the library at the time, was turned into a makeshift morgue. Survivors endured the grim task of reclaiming their loved ones by walking up and down the rows of corpses.

So much timber had fallen that there was enough wood to build 200,000 five-room houses. The sawing and salvaging of lumber from the storm would take five years to finish (Scotti, p.121). President Roosevelt sent thousands of WPA (Works Progress Administration) and CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) workers throughout New York and New England to work in the cleanup effort. My father often mentioned that he left home in 1938 at the age of 16 to build roads with the CCC's. He lived in Brooklyn, NY then and never mentioned where he was sent to work, nor did he ever bring up the hurricane. I cannot help but wonder if he ever made it to our neck of the woods to work during the 1938 rebuilding effort.



WESTERLY LIBRARY-GEORGE H. UTTER COLLECTION

Our feature this month highlights our most recent acquisition, a letter written September 30, 1938 by Leola A. Craig to George Bliven thanking him for rescuing her out of the storm. We wish to thank Madlin Algieri of Westerly for preserving it all these years.

# The Gratitude of Leola A. Craig

*The following is a transcription of the letter written by Leola A. Craig of Watch Hill to George Bliven. It is possible that the writer's maiden name was Leola A. Plimpton (b. 1872) and was married to Charles G. Craig. – ed.*

Sept 30/38  
East Beach Road  
Briar Patch

Mr. George Bliven

Dear Friend:

I am writing hoping you will receive this letter. I owe my life to you also Virginia's and words fail me to express my gratitude for taking me out of the storm. I shall never forget that ride and hope you arrived home safely and found your home in good shape.

I am staying with Mrs. Kennedy so I can be near where the wreckage has landed. The store and bath house is opposite here and the cottage is over near Dr. Briggs' home. Our house at Watch Hill is not livable and my daughter is staying opposite Starling's Garage on Watch Hill Road.

There are guards at the East Beach Road and they will not let anyone pass who does not have a permit. The young man my son-in-law sent over for me must have missed us when we turned back to go to Bradford and went down to the store and could not get there as the tidal wave came shortly after he left. The young Mr. Kennedy and he looked all night after the store settled in the lots opposite here to try to find us and everyone thought we were lost.



Ed's car went up on a stone wall back of the Gables and so they have no car. This is a terrible experience but I am so thankful to be able to be with a roof over my head and enough to eat.

Mrs. Kennedy has done everything to make me comfortable and yesterday I went down to the building that is left and salvaged a little clothing and bedding. The beach is bare all along the shore. I hope the Blivens I see in the paper were not relatives of yours. I am in hopes before long to see you and in some way repay you for what you did for us. I hope your wife has felt no effects from her experience as I owe as much to her as anyone for insisting that we should leave when we did.

The pond is mild today and can see the breakers on the ocean and hope no one will be lost today.

There is a radio station here to send radio messages and receive them. A young man from Maine off of a patrol boat [?].

I hope you will excuse my writing with a pencil as I have no pen with me.

Again accept my sincere gratitude for all you did for me and will certainly not forget it when I get in a position where I can repay you in part.

Sincerely,

Leola A. Craig

## The Gratitude of Leola A. Craig - continued

Shown here is a sample of Leola Craig's actual letter. The Westerly Historical Society welcomes any information about either the writer or the addressee, George Bliven. Details of the events described in the letter would also help us to understand the various references made by the writer. For example, who were Mrs. Kennedy and Virginia? Is there any information about Dr. Briggs or Starlings Garage? Where was the "Gables" where "Ed's" car washed up onto a stone wall? Please feel free to write us at Box 91, Westerly, RI 02891 or send an email to [whstreasurer@gmail.com](mailto:whstreasurer@gmail.com).



MISQUAMICUT BEACH AFTER THE STORM - 1938

Sept 30/38  
East Beach Road  
Buar Pateh

Mr George Bliven

Dear friend: I am writing  
hoping you will receive this  
letter I owe my life to you also  
Virginia's and would fail me to  
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I am staying with Mrs Kennedy  
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Dr Briggs home. Our house at  
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## **FAIR WESTERLY NOW IN PRINT**

*We are pleased to announce the availability of our new book, Fair Westerly. Here are some excerpts from the foreword written by Westerly Historical Society president, Ed Fazio.*

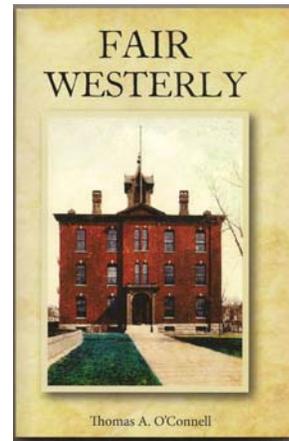
This latest and most ambitious publication by the Westerly Historical Society delivers an extensive compilation of historical topics about our little part of New England. In this edition, editor and chief contributor, Tom O'Connell, has collaborated with long time local historian, Gloria Russell, and other local authors to create the most diverse selection of subjects ever published by the Society.

Fair Westerly includes stories and reminiscences on subjects ranging from religion to sports. A major portion of the book recalls many of our interesting and colorful local personalities, and the stories of Westerly history are augmented by tales from Watch Hill, Hopkinton, and Pawcatuck.

Many of the articles in this book appeared in the Society newsletter, *Westerly's Witness* and I am sure most readers are familiar with Gloria Russell's extensive contributions to the *Westerly Sun*, but this is the first time this material has been brought together in a permanent volume to be preserved and enjoyed for years to come. Preserving and communicating local history is the primary imperative of the Society. It is the motivation for Mr. O'Connell's tireless efforts and hundreds of hours spent researching out and sifting through local history, and has inspired him and other authors to devote their literary skill to the telling of these wonderful stories.



FAIR WESTERLY BACK COVER



### ***Westerly Historical Society Fair Westerly Book Order Form***

Our newest publication, *Fair Westerly*, is now available for purchase. Copies are available at \$19.95 (RI residents please add 7% sales tax, \$21.35 total price within RI).

Please send me \_\_\_\_ copy(ies) of *Fair Westerly*.  
Enclosed please find my check for  
\$\_\_\_\_\_.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State and Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_

Send this form with your check or money order to:  
**Westerly Historical Society  
PO Box 91  
Westerly, RI 02891**

## RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



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

### A New Permanent Home for the Westerly Historical Society

The carriage house expansion is well underway at the Babcock-Smith House Museum. The Westerly Historical Society soon will move its archived collection of written works and artifacts from the Westerly Library into its new archive storage area at the renovated carriage house. A reception area, as well as room for exhibits, larger meetings, and historical research is planned the additional floor space.

Donations to the capital building fund can still be made by mailing checks to the Babcock-Smith House Museum, 124 Granite St., Westerly, RI 02891.

