



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

October 2015

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Calendar of Events

The Babcock-Smith House Museum Presents
Tuesday, October 6, 2015 7:00 P.M.
Little Rhody and the Others



Roberta Mudge Humble, author, speaker, and professor will tout Rhode Island but offer an eye and earful of the other 49 states, as well. This presentation is meant to both entertain and inform. The audience will realize that Rhode Island is a state as significant as any other – all in the very best of ways. This program is always well received because of the gorgeous pictures, the "wow" information, and the touch of home-spun humor.

Calendar of Events-Continued

October 18, 2015 2:00 P.M.
Steamboats of the Pawcatuck River



Ann L. Smith, Westerly Historical Society newsletter editor and treasurer, will give a talk entitled, "Steamboats of the Pawcatuck River" on Sunday, October 18, 2015 at 2:00 P.M. Ms. Smith has done extensive research on this subject as preparation for the museum exhibit by the same name which ran at the Babcock-Smith House Museum during the summer of this year. In addition, Ann Smith contributed two feature articles about the Pawcatuck River steamboats to the Westerly Historical Society's newsletter last season.

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

Free Admission

to Westerly Historical Society Members and
Members of the Babcock-Smith House Museum
Admission for Non-Members: \$5.00
Memberships Available at:
<http://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/membership/>

Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

If you've never Googled the term "Westerly Rhode Island history" it may be worth one's while to try it. When we're looking for nothing in particular and some obscure item piques our interest, aah, now there's the beginning of a story. Such was the case when an article about the "Book of Wills No. 1 of the Providence Plantation" popped up from the 1889 *New York Times*. The article was entitled, "An Old Liquor License" and bore the date-line "Westerly, R.I., June 22."

Apropos of the overthrow of prohibition in Little Rhody this week, there has been discovered in "Book of Wills No. 1" of the Providence Plantation, running from 1670 to 1716, a note of the first liquor license probably ever granted in this territory.

What follows is a transcription of the note, written in the style of the time, replete with phrases like "ye towne council" and "ye disorderly selling of strong drinks without there [sic] license." And so it came to pass that, in the interest of public order, a liquor license was conferred upon John Whipple Jr. and Mary Pray on the second day of March, 1680. The *Times* article concludes with

"Book of Wills No.1" has lots of history. It was thrown into the river during King Philip's War, but was recovered. Quite lately it was repaired and its battered, tender leaves braced up with transparent parchment. Paper was valuable in those days, and the keeper of the records turned the book upside down after it was partly filled and wrote the other way.

One hundred and twenty five years have passed since this story first appeared. Older still is the Book of Wills No. 1. Aside from wondering who now owns this rare piece of history, I was stunned to learn that there was a prohibition within the State of Rhode Island that ended in 1889. After some more digging, it seems that Rhode Island was in and out of Prohibition several times between 1852 and 1889, but to get the details, you'll have to check out pages 3-4 off this month's *Westerly's Witness* for the article entitled "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes - A Short History of the Temperance Movement in Rhode Island."

On page 5 we bring you a program review of "Spies in Revolutionary Rhode Island," a talk by Christian M. McBurney. Mr. McBurney is the owner of the website, "Small State, Big History" (smallstatebighistory.com) which features weekly articles by Rhode Island's best and brightest historians. Our own Tom O'Connell was featured in May of this year when McBurney ran "About That Lake in Wilcox Park," an excerpt from *Fair Westerly* written and compiled by Tom O'Connell.



Christian M. McBurney

PHOTO COURTESY OF SMALLSTATEBIGHISTORY.COM

Last month we bade farewell to long-time board member Lise Mayers who served us faithfully as membership chairperson for several years. While still an active member of the Westerly Historical Society, Lise has taken on a full plate of professional duties and avocations that will necessitate having someone else fulfill her membership role on the board. Please refer to page 6 for the details of this position. Interested parties are **welcome** to apply for this volunteer opportunity.

Lastly, we lost another beloved member of the Westerly Historical Society on September 11 of this year. Katherine "Kay" Nolan died at the Westerly Health Center at the age of 95. Katherine was a member of the Westerly Historical Society executive board for more than ten years. She was an avid bridge player, founding member of the Lights of Love for the Hospital Auxiliary, Hospital Scholarship committee, a painter in oils with her Tuesday group, a 4-H leader, and a faithful communicant of St. Clare Church.

Kay was predeceased by her husband John and by her bother Thomas Briody. She leaves two daughters, Jane and Margaret, and a son, David. She will be sadly missed by her six grandchildren, seven great-grandchildren and several nieces and nephews

Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes

A Short History of the Temperance Movement in Rhode Island

By Ann L. Smith

For most of us, the mention of “Prohibition” conjures up mental images of bootleggers and the Roaring 20s. The Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution went into effect on January 1, 1920 after being ratified by the required three-fourths of the American States. In fact, all but one U.S. state ratified the Eighteenth Amendment and the holdout was none other than Little Rhody.

The Temperance movement in the United States was not unique to the twentieth century. Organized efforts to ban the use of alcohol date at least as far back as the American Revolution. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the the Declaration of Independence, served as Surgeon General in the Continental Army. He documented the deleterious effects of alcohol abuse in his 1784 pamphlet, “An Inquiry into the Effects of Spiritous Liquors on the Human Mind and Body,” after witnessing first-hand the rampant over-consumption among members of the militia.

In time, the temperance movement took hold in the New England states. In 1805 Asa Niles, an itinerant preacher, traveled around Rhode Island preaching his message of temperance. Although fashionable, not every citizen was swept up in the temperance movement. Robert Geake, in an article published this year, recounts how the Reverend Niles would sometimes have stones thrown at him and that his horse was sheared of its mane and tail once while Niles was delivering a sermon. Nevertheless, Niles amassed such a following that he formed his own church that often met at the Kent County courthouse.

Other Protestant churches took up the temperance cause in the 1820s and 1830s. Mill owners began to support the temperance movement in order to promote worker safety and productivity. Physicians like Charles Jewett, who followed Dr. Rush’s example, also began to speak out against the effects of alcohol.

By the late 1830s, the general laws of the State of Rhode Island allowed its cities and towns to invoke the so-called “local option” which allowed individual towns to ban the sale and use of alcoholic beverages. In the summer of 1838, Westerly invoked the local option as did ten other towns and, eventually, Providence. The push was on to make alcohol illegal throughout the state.

By 1852, through the efforts of Dr. Jewett and others, the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted an Act of Prohibition. This Prohibition lasted until its repeal in 1863, but not before certain acts of violence and murder had been carried out by various dissidents among the citizenry. In 1854, the barn of William Harrison, a well-known prohibitionist of Warwick, was leveled when a powder keg was detonated from within. The perpetrators were never caught. In May of 1859, Burrill Arnold, another prohibitionist, was shot to death through the window of his store while chatting with a neighbor in Centerville. But it was not the counter-cultural actions of the dissenters that ended the Prohibition of 1852. The northeren states were at war with the South by 1863, and Prohibition was seen as a distraction more than anything else.

At the end of the Civil War, the Temperance movement once again was on the march. Local chapters of various anti-alcohol societies and brotherhoods sprang up all around the state. On January 15 and 16, 1867, The Rhode Island Chapter of the Independent Order of Good Templars (IOGT) was organized at the Armory and Methodist Halls (located on Main Street) in Westerly. The IOGT’s constitution pledged the order’s opposition to the sale, manufacture, and consumption of alcoholic beverages. The IOGT Grand Worthy Chief was Peleg L. Berry. The Rhode Island Anti-Saloon League, which had been active since the early part of the nineteenth century, stepped up its efforts and was joined by the Rhode Island Temperance Union which was also formed in 1867.

In 1869 the IOGT petitioned the Rhode Island General Assembly for passage of a stringent statewide prohibitory statute. The IOGT even considered forming its own political party but later abandoned the idea.

By 1870 The Rhode Island Temperance Union was holding annual temperance meetings at Rocky Point in Warwick. These “jubilee” meetings continued for several years at that location and consisted of guest speakers, temperance bands, poetry recitals, fellowship, and common meals.

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A Short History of the Temperance Movement in Rhode Island

(continued from page 3)

In 1874 another Prohibition was adopted, but it lasted only eighteen months. In April 1886 the Rhode Island Constitution was again amended to make the manufacture and sale of alcohol illegal within the state. In June of 1889, this third Prohibition was repealed.

The problem with the third Prohibition was that enforcing the law was as much of a burden as dealing with the effects of alcohol consumption itself. A report issued by Governor John W. Davis cited that the expense of controlling alcohol-related violations outweighed the revenue brought in by fines and taxes. The *Providence Journal* and other newspapers declared the whole undertaking a disaster. While the editorials of the day offered varying viewpoints, a common thread was that the state was no better off with Prohibition as without it. On the one hand, the courts were jammed with cases related to alcohol violations, and on the other, the streets were populated with more taverns and imbibers than ever before. Consider this excerpt from the *Pawtucket Daily Gazette and Chronicle*, of September 20, 1889, "More drunken men were seen on our streets during the past week than were seen here in the three years of the non-enforced Prohibitory law." And the *Newport Daily News* said, Sept. 28, 1889:

Drunkenness is increasing, and it appears to be the general sentiment of the community that no more liquor licenses should be granted. Men under the influence of liquor, but not in any way unable to reach their destination, are seen on any hand by the police and others.

In 1901 the Rhode Island Temperance League was allowed to introduce a five-bill package to the General Assembly that would make the operation of saloons less profitable and more restrictive. The League's wish-list sought to make the sale of alcohol-based medications available by prescription only and attempted to set specific penalties for people found guilty of selling alcohol to those already under the influence. *The Westerly Sun* praised the bills and implied that they should become law. None of the bills passed, however. The only consolation was that

a measure compelling the State Board of Pharmacy to report infractions by druggists was enacted.

Between 1900 and the ratification the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the Temperance movement was alive and well in Westerly as in the rest of the state. The records of the Rhode Island General Assembly for 1905 list the incorporation of the Westerly Chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Its founding members were listed as Abby C. Griffin, E. A. Whitford, L. S. Foster, E. J. Farnsworth, Nancy D. Pendleton, M. J. B. Clarke, and Mary J. Moore.

Despite the most fervent efforts of this and other groups, Rhode Island remained deeply divided on the question of alcohol consumption. Regardless of the benefits of temperance, alcohol had always, and will always, create cash flows. Add to that the failures of three previous state Prohibitions, and one can easily see why Rhode Island never ratified the Eighteenth Amendment.

SUGGESTED READING

There is much more to the Prohibition story in Rhode Island. With the advent of the nationwide Prohibition era, an entire underground business sprang up surrounding the sale and consumption of alcohol. Please check out Robert Geake's (2015) wonderful two-part series entitled "From Saints to Bootleggers: The Struggle for Temperance and Prohibition in Kent County, 1805-1937" at www.SmallStateBigHistory.com

Other sources of information can be found at:

Paul T Carcieri, "A History of Temperance and Prohibition in Rhode Island, 1820-1916" (January 1, 2007). *ETD Collection for Providence College*. Paper AAI3262589.

and

Meader, J. R., (1891) *The Cyclopaedia of Temperance and Prohibition: A Reference Book of Facts, Statistics, and General Information on All Phases of the Drink Question, the Temperance Movement and the Prohibition Agitation*
Funk and Wagnalls, New York

Program Review: Spies in Revolutionary Rhode Island

by Ann L. Smith

“The history of spying is full of stories,” remarked author Christian M. McBurney as he began his entertaining presentation at the Westerly Historical Society on Sunday, September 13. Indeed, each vignette described during the talk seemed like something out of a contemporary thriller rather than from a historical treatise on the Revolutionary War. And although much has been written about the American Revolution, McBurney’s latest book, *Spies in Revolutionary Rhode Island*, is the “first detailed description of the extraordinary espionage activities surrounding Clinton’s bold plan to attack the French fleet and army that landed at Newport on July 11, 1780, as well as the subsequent feints and actions taken by the opposing forces while the French occupied Newport.” Clinton, of course was the British commander in chief, Henry Clinton, whose 71 ships and 10,000 troops occupied Newport beginning late in the year 1776.

Newport, RI was one of the five key cities during the American Revolution. The others were Charleston, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Stonington, CT was an important local port and was home to many privateers who would fight the British for the right sum of money. Westerly, RI played a minor role in connection to the British occupation of Newport in that the movement of people and ships to and from New York often involved stops in Westerly. There were at least a few patriots from Westerly who figured prominently in historical record, however. McBurney mentions one of these in his book.

“On August 3, 1789, Joseph Babcock of Westerly informed Rhode Island’s governor, William Greene, ‘Last night a man, (since supposed a spy)’ inquired ‘whether there was no way to cross over from the beach’ at Westerly to Block Island. Babcock continued, ‘This fellow, though dressed like a tar [sailor] outwardly, yet was accidentally observed to be well-dressed underneath.’ Babcock added as a postscript, ‘Yesterday about 3 o’clock, a white bottomed boat was seen by Colonel [Joseph] Noyes and others hovering near the shore and other boats seemingly in concert with it. Afterwards the fog thickened so that we lost sight of them but not doubted but that they were sent by the enemy for malicious purposes.’”

Some women too were active as spies during the

Revolutionary War. One notable tale involves Mary Wenwood who traveled from Cambridge to Newport to enlist the help of her former husband, Godfrey Wenwood. Arriving at her ex-husband’s barge on Bannister’s Wharf, the former Mrs. Wenwood handed over a sealed note and trustingly asked the good Mr. Wenwood to deliver it to Captain James Wallace of the British ship, the *Rose*. Without letting on that he was no longer a Loyalist, Mr. Wenwood accepted the note and promised to do as she asked. Godfrey Wenwood then took the note to his friend Adam Maxwell who ran a school near the Brick Market. Together they opened it and discovered that it was written in code. The letter found its way to Henry Ward, the Secretary of State of Rhode Island, was then sent to the Rhode Island Commander of the Continental Army, Nathaniel Greene, and eventually was forwarded to General George Washington. Washington sent Godfrey Wenwood to question his former wife in hopes that he could innocently know the author of the letter. Mrs. Wenwood was not easily fooled and did not cooperate.

When word reached Mary Wenwood that she would be subject to severe punishment if she did not cooperate, she reluctantly presented herself before General Washington where she gave up the name of the man who penned the coded letter. It was none other than Dr. Benjamin Church, surgeon general of the Continental army and a person close to George Washington. The Patriots deciphered the note somewhat easily and the contents confirmed that Dr. Church was a traitor. He was found guilty of treason and was jailed. After serving about a year in prison he was allowed to depart for the Caribbean and was never heard from again. Mary Wenwood, incidentally, was found to be pregnant with Dr. Church’s child.

McBurney’s work is full of fascinating tales such as this one, but our short program precluded the telling of all but a few. Even though the British had some talented spies (as did the Continentals), they eventually suffered a major defeat against the Colonists at Yorktown in 1781 and the Revolution ended in 1783 at which time the British finally relinquished control of Newport.

Christian M. McBurney’s books can be ordered online at www.Amazon.com.

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



The Westerly Historical Society Executive Board Needs You!

The Westerly Historical Society seeks a new membership secretary to join its executive board. This is a great way to learn more about the organization, meet new people, and have a role in the preservation and sharing of Westerly's history.

Responsibilities:

- Maintain an accurate list of members
- Send renewal letters according to an established schedule (October, January)
- Attend Westerly Historical Society programs (usually Sunday afternoons, 5-6 times per year) to help collect admission donations from non-members and encourage new memberships

-Help to enact Board initiatives to recruit new members

Qualifications:

- Comfortable using online email (Google mail) and spreadsheets
- Ability to attend most board meetings (first Wednesday, September through May)
- Possess an interest in local history and Westerly Historical Society activities

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Please contact Ed Fazio, WHS President, at
401-322-8240 or
whspresident@gmail.com to learn more.