



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

November-December 2016

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Calendar of Events

January 15, 2017 - 2:00 P.M.

Members Only event!

A Potluck Dinner

and Research Sharing Afternoon

You are cordially invited to our winter potluck dinner. The price of admission is just to bring along a potluck dish of any kind to share. We will happily eat whatever shows up rather than planning a balanced meal. Please bring your choice of appetizers, entrees, sides, or desserts. Beverages (coffee, tea, water, cider) and bread /rolls will be provided. Interested parties are invited to speak (5-10 minutes) on their current historical research or projects.

Please contact Pamela Scott, Program Director, with your topic. Email:

whsprograms@gmail.com or phone

(401)-741-8705.

Looking forward to a wonderful afternoon!

See you then!

~ ~ ~

**Sunday 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/>

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Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

In November of 2014 Julie Nathanson from the Pawtuxet Valley Preservation and Historical Society Cemetery Group will spoke about her work on the RI Cemeteries database and the related transcription project. (See our November-December 2014 issue of *Westerly's Witness* at <https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/whs-newsletter-2014-11.pdf> and scroll to Page 4).

In September this year we spoke with Alex La Force, Commission Member of the R.I. Historical Cemetery Commission. As you may recall, Rhode Island has thousands of small cemeteries that were family-owned or placed independently of any religious institutions. This was a reflection of Rhode Island's social ethic of religious freedom dating back to the time of Roger Williams. Alex La Force is currently involved in updating the location of each historic cemetery in Rhode Island. With the aid of global positioning technology, each cemetery's listing will eventually contain its GPS coordinates. The Westerly Historical Society was tasked with providing the location of all historic cemeteries within the town. Thanks to the fastidious work of our expert volunteers, our cemetery records were found to be in very good order. Recognition must be given to those who have devoted their time and talents throughout the years in keeping our records complete. We especially would like to thank the following individuals for their contributions: Colonel John Coulahan, Thomas A. O'Connell, Dwight Brown and his late wife Anna Brown, and John and Brenda Linton Here is a note of thanks we received recently from Alex:

I would like to thank you for all the help you provided me last week. I had expected to be given a box, or several, through which I would have to dig in order to find the information on the Westerly cemeteries I was looking for. And I assumed that I would have to make several trips in order to do so. However, I was more than pleasantly surprised and impressed that everything was in such perfect order. It only took us an hour and a half to find all the information I needed to be able to locate, assess, and GPS the many cemeteries without GPS readings

in Westerly. You and the WHS members who did all the work locating the cemeteries saved me hours and hours of time and effort that I can now use for installing signs.

Thank you again...

On January 15th, we are hosting a "members-only" pot-luck dinner at 2:00 P. M. We are preparing to showcase our current projects by having board members and invited guests give a brief summary of their latest research or project. If you've ever wondered what it takes to research an article for publication, or how we select our speakers, this is your chance to find out! We hope you will join us for a relaxed afternoon of pot-luck dinner and socializing with your fellow historical society members.

We have received many membership renewals over the last six weeks and we wish to express our deepest thanks to all those who have renewed so far. We are grateful especially to all those who have joined at the patron, benefactor, or sustaining level. Your loyalty, thoughtfulness, and generosity promote our worthy endeavors and we could not continue our important works without your support. If you have not yet renewed your membership, please visit <http://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/membership/> and scroll down to renew online or mail your check to:

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

We are now offering Westerly Historical Society **gift memberships** as an added incentive to joining. For every two memberships purchased, a third will be provided to you at no charge. The complimentary membership may be applied to a member's own dues but cannot be used as payment for the dues of a previously enrolled member. See Page 6 for details.

Our next issue of *Westerly's Witness* is scheduled for late January and will be another expanded issue. In the meantime we hope you will join us at the Babcock-Smith House Museum for their Holiday Weekend event on December 3-4 featuring the annual favorite, "A Celebration of Trees" (see Page 7 for details) and again in January as we chase away the winter cold with a warm and cozy pot-luck meal. We hope to see you there!

Program Review: The Quonset Air Museum

By Ann L. Smith

You don't have to be an aficionado of military history to appreciate the things you might find at an aviation museum. Many people are familiar with the largest air museum in the United States, housed at the Smithsonian Institution, but most don't know that air museums dot the countryside in almost every state including Alaska and Hawaii. Rhode Island has recently seen the closure of its only air museum and has joined West Virginia as one of the two states in the country that are without one.

The history of the Quonset Air Museum is as interesting as it is sad. In 1992 a spirited group of individuals that included our November speaker, Lawrence Webster, had the vision to showcase Rhode Island's most important military aircraft. Webster is an award-winning mechanical engineer known in aviation history circles as the "aluminum undertaker" because of his extensive work excavating air crash sites. His love of aircraft began in 1961 when, as a young teenager, he began salvaging and restoring crashed planes from the local area. By his junior year in high school, Larry had brought over 3,000 pounds of airplane parts back to his family farm where he piled them behind their barn.

What started as a pastime for Larry eventually blossomed into a life-long endeavor. As is so often the case with historical research, one thing leads to another until the historian is faced a plethora of questions to answer. Even though researching history via the printed word is a worthy undertaking, some of the most exciting tales take shape beginning with an item or an artifact. Such was the case for Larry Webster and his fellow aircraft aficionados in 1992.

The founders of the Quonset Air Museum established their operation in Painting Hangar #488 at the former Naval Air Station at Quonset Point. This 50,000 square foot facility was one of only three existing specialized wood and brick hangars built during World War II. An extensive archive of books, magazines, manuals, photos, documents and blueprints were amassed in addition to over two dozen classic planes and helicopters. Visitors to the museum have been treated to up-close encounters with the *Intruder*, *Neptune*, and *Skyhawk* as well as the *Tomcat*, *Hellcat* and *Harrier*. Various restorations have taken place over the years. Museum members have taken much pride in their work and have

enjoyed sharing their restoration projects with the general public, even while some projects were yet unfinished. A Russian MiG-15 from Korea was one such project of recent memory.

An A-6E Intruder and A-7D Corsair II from the Vietnam era and several helicopters including a Bell Huey and Cobra gunship were part of this impressive collection. The F-14 Tomcat flew in the movie *Top Gun* with Tom Cruise and the last Navy A-6 Intruder in existence was also housed at Quonset Point. A Grumman F6F-5 Hellcat and TBM-3 Avenger from WW II were part of the collection as well.

In the late winter of 2015, a massive snowfall collapsed the roof of the Hangar #488 and the Quonset Air Museum at first seemed doomed. Through the valiant efforts of its members, a robust restoration effort was immediately undertaken. Museum President David Payne, Larry Webster, and others developed a business plan and sought funding from both private and government sources. Bond money was already in the state's treasury for projects like local museums and a pair of investors had also stepped forward with \$18 million in funding. The business plan was well-received.

Sadly, the clock ran out on that year's legislative session without the funding bill ever having been brought to the floor for a vote. The private investors according to Webster, were also subject to intimidation by unnamed parties to the extent that they abandoned the project entirely. The museum bond monies were eventually awarded, but the entire sum that had been earmarked, some \$10 million, was granted to a single entity.

One can only speculate as to the reasons why the government was reluctant to revive the Quonset Air Museum. The explanation may have something to do with the U.S. Navy's reluctance to cooperate with private individuals like Webster who have spent their lives salvaging government property. In 1994, the United States Department of Defense took exception to the fact that one of its wrecks had been disturbed by Webster and filed suit against him in Federal Court. It was only through the intervention of Congressman James Langevin that the suit was settled without any penalties for Larry Webster or the Quonset Air Museum. *(Continued on Page 4)*

Quonset Air Museum

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Throughout his life Larry Webster has visited and documented over 300 crash sites up and down the East Coast. He has personally excavated 25 of them. Not all of these have been on land, however. Wrecks have been reclaimed from Ninigret Pond in Charlestown, the Pawcatuck River, and the Atlantic Ocean. Larry hopes to complete the documentation of all 20,000 known plane crash sites in New England.



LARRY WEBSTER TAKES A QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE
PHOTO: ANN SMITH

The collection of aircraft at Quonset is slowly being sold off or donated away. All that remains are photos, articles, and the stories of the people who flew these awesome machines. Through it all, Larry Webster has amassed a wealth of knowledge on not just the planes themselves but the intimate details of their crash victims. Some, like Lt. J.P. Zubrowski, USN Ret., survived their crashes and have come out to see the very planes that nearly took their lives. At least one other wreckage was said to be haunted and others have been discovered as makeshift bear-dens or objects of target practice for local municipalities.

Although no book is in the offing, members inquired about the possibility of a such a volume in the future. The vast amount of photographs that were shown after the talk were both rare and interesting. If the Quonset Air Museum must come to an end, the memories of its existence and the stories of its people, if captured in print, would be an important contribution to our local history for generations to come.

Larry Webster's talk was the perfect ending to our fall trilogy of transportation programs. From the sinking of the *U-853* to the antique and classic car show, what better way to end the season than with this important talk on the aviation history of our area.

PUBLICATIONS CORNER

Westerly's Gold...Her People

By Thomas A. O'Connell

Second Edition

Now in Print!

Purchase online at

<http://www.lulu.com/shop/thomas-a-oconnell/westerlys-gold/paperback/product-22667167.html>

or

Mail your check payable to the
Westerly Historical Society and
send with your name and shipping address to:

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

\$12.95 plus \$2.50 Shipping
(RI Residents add \$0.90 Sales Tax)

See our entire selection of publications for sale online
by visiting our website

<https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/gift-shop/>

Save time and money!

Renew your membership online at

<https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/membership/>

Individual: \$20 Family \$30 Sustaining \$50
Patron \$100 Benefactor \$250 +

Membership Benefits:

- Free Admission to Westerly Historical Society programs
- Free Admission to the Babcock-Smith House Museum and programs
- Subscription to monthly newsletter, *Westerly's Witness* (printed from September to May)
- Voting privileges at the Annual Meeting

Lotteryville 2.0

By Ann L. Smith

Most Westerly historians are familiar with the story of how Avondale got its name. Formerly known as "Lotteryville," this enclave of homes and farms changed its name to Avondale when the U.S. Post Office established a branch there in 1894. Joseph Pendleton's government-sanctioned lottery allowed him to divide his estate into lots and sell the tracts by means of a lottery. What was once a single large parcel became home to 126 families. Pendleton avoided bankruptcy and a new village was born.

Frederic Denison chronicled the story of Lotteryville in his (now important) work, *Westerly and its Witnesses, For Two Hundred and Fifty Years, 1626-1876*. This volume has been a reading staple for this area's local historians practically from the time it was published. From our first settlers' beginnings with the native tribes to the listing of over one hundred cemeteries, Denison's work has proved to be the premier point of reference for anything regarding Westerly's history up to 1876.

Denison was preacher at the First Baptist Church of Westerly from 1848 to 1854 before moving to Norwich, Connecticut. We would later return to Rhode Island and settle in Central Falls for a time. He wrote many poems, hymns, newspaper articles, memorial addresses, and sermons. His conservative opinions are evident throughout *Westerly and its Witnesses* where he freely condemns the evils of slavery, alcohol, and gambling. More than a few amusing vignettes are to be found among its pages and the book as a whole is worth reading to this day.

One of Denison's chapters is entitled, "Swindles and Swindlers" and recounts the many times Westerly's people have been taken in by one scheme or another. Long before P.T. Barnum, Westerly had its share of clairvoyants, healers, charlatans, and snake-oil salesmen. Even the not-so-bad practice of holding bazaars to pay off church debts comes under fire by Reverend Denison, but there were far worse schemes that befell Westerly's people before they were foolishly fleeced of their coins.

In the 1840s the New-York-based American Art Union was enjoying great success in its mission to bring culture to the masses while supporting promising artists who had little means of support. For

five dollars a year, members of the AAU would receive a copy of the minutes from the annual meeting, free admission to their Apollo Gallery, at least one original engraving published by the Union from an original piece of art by a contemporary American artist, and in New York City, the members also received a ticket in a lottery to win an original piece of art from within the collection. The American Art Union disbanded when, in 1851, there were not enough subscriptions to pay for a painting to be raffled. This is because many members would postpone their subscriptions until they saw that a piece was worth winning. With little capital in reserve, the AAU was unable to purchase a painting in time for the drawing and declared bankruptcy shortly thereafter.

In Rhode Island, the prominent gentry of Newport and Providence petitioned the state legislature to allow for the formation of auxiliary art unions here so that poor artists could be helped and the citizenry be acculturated. Even though the art unions' activities would involve tickets and prizes, the legislature looked at their formation as a benevolent act rather than one which would promote outright gambling.

Seemingly overnight, the state was flooded with art unions which were nothing more than thinly veiled gambling schemes. Denison writes

In every town and village greedy men would put up pianos, carriages, horses, house lots, goods, furniture; in short, whatever they had, by tickets and drawings. By calling the affair an "art union," the law was silenced.

The gambling wave going out from Providence rolled over the state. Westerly suffered her share in the mania and the guilt. When ministers lifted up their voice against the wickedness, they were denounced meddlers, theorists, and alarmists. But truth finally triumphed, and the legislature hastened to repeal their unfortunate act.

Even with the repeal of the Art Unions Act, lotteries and sweepstakes-type contests persisted. Perhaps the most famous of swindles was witnessed by the people of Westerly in 1866 when the

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Lotteryville 2.0

(continued from Page 5)

C. W. Banner & Co. came to town. The agents of this grand scheme settled into the “Brick Hotel” (presumed now to be the Dixon House Hotel) and conducted their business from their rooms. They called their sweepstakes the “Grand Gift Banquet.” Soon flyers and brochures were distributed far and wide and were even mailed in bulk to far-off places across the country. For the mere price of a one-dollar ticket, participants would receive entry into a drawing which touted a prize pool worth \$250,000.

Sensational advertisements promised a top prize of \$15,000 with lesser prizes consisting of building lots in Westerly, gold watches, and other cash prizes ranging from five to ten dollars. The drawing date was set for February 28, 1867. Money began rolling in for the benefit of the C. W. Banner & Co. from folks from near and far. Sub-agents were stationed in other locations throughout the land. In all, varying estimates put the amount collected between \$70,000 and \$100,000 with at least \$10,000 of that amount coming out of the pockets of Westerly’s citizens.

Preachers and other sensible types tried in vain to warn people of their foolishness and to expose the trickery of the crafty ticket-sellers. All of this was for naught and, as Denison wrote, “Lottery tickets were more potent than reason and all the rules of honesty.” Just before the drawing date arrived, the C.W. Banner & Co. and all its agents had disappeared. They absconded as thieves, departing by night, scattering in all different directions. They left behind but one female accomplice, the wife of one of the perpetrators, to gather the last of their belongings and pay the bill for their board.

Denison’s final findings on the matter are these:

In vain was the wrath, swearing, and threatening of the ticket-holders. C. W. Banner & Co. could never be found; it was a convenient name under which consummate scoundrels fleeced the silly worship of Mammon...The rocks on which ignorant or reckless voyagers founder should be marked for the benefit of the world. Men who propose to launch upon the sea of business may wisely consider the wrecks floating on that tide, and study the causes of their ruin.

While *Westerly and its Witnesses* remains a valuable work for Westerly historians, it provides a glimpse into the personal views of the author. Denison was quick to provide healthy doses of judgment for all those who would waiver from a temperate lifestyle. His histories of the many churches and sects that have existed in Westerly are peppered with the author’s opinions of how well or poorly each one was run.

Denison was so conservative in his beliefs that he felt it appropriate to condemn even the most humble games of chance conducted by the local religious establishments. Perhaps the scandals perpetrated by the art unions and the C.W. Banner & Co. darkened his view of all types of lotteries, or maybe he was always of a strict biblical mind with regard to grab-bags and drawings. Whatever the case, Denison’s writings regarding lotteries (as well as his entire book) are still a good read. Digital copies of *Westerly and its Witnesses* can be viewed and downloaded from

<https://archive.org/details/westerlyrhodeis00denigoog>

Membership Special! Buy Two Get One Free!

We are now offering Westerly Historical Society **gift memberships** as an added incentive to joining. For every two memberships purchased, a third will be provided to you at no charge. The complimentary membership may be applied to a member’s own dues but cannot be used as payment for the dues of a previously enrolled member. Simply let us know under “Add special instructions to the seller” when ordering online that you are purchasing gifts or enclose a note with your check if mailing to the address below. A commemorative card acknowledging your donation will be sent to the person(s) receiving gift membership.

Visit us online or mail to:
Westerly Historical Society
P.O. Box 91
Westerly RI 02891

<https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/membership/>

Individual: \$20 Family \$30 Sustaining \$50
Patron \$100 Benefactor \$250 +

The Babcock-Smith House Museum Proudly Presents

Holiday Weekend

December 3 and 4, 2016



Saturday, December 3, 2016 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M.

Celebration of Trees*

Joshua's Store and Bazaar: baked goods and gently used Christmas items, basket raffle, holiday greens, PBS video and book *Carved From Stone*
Stop and visit the Westerly Historical Society members' table!

Sunday, December 4, 2016 2:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M.

Holiday Concert featuring Tenor Michael Grillo

Refreshments following the concert

Celebration of Trees* from 2:45 to 5:00 P.M.

Joshua's Store



* Celebration of Trees: Donations gratefully accepted.

Sunday afternoon includes both the concert and the Celebration of Trees.

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



There's Still Time to Go Paperless

In an effort to contain costs, the Westerly Historical Society offers the option to go paperless to our subscribers of the *Westerly's Witness* newsletter.

The *Westerly's Witness* newsletter current issues can be accessed at www.WesterlyHistoricalSociety.org with your members-only password.

If you would like to discontinue paper mailings and 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.

If you would like to keep receiving your hard copy of the newsletter **in addition** to the e-newsletter, please let us know that when you sign up for the e-newsletter and you will continue to receive a paper copy as you always have.

From All of Us

As we move ever closer to the holiday season, we hope you will take time to reflect on the past, give thanks, and celebrate all that is good in your lives.



Whatever your holiday and no matter your faith, we wish you our sincerest and warmest blessings now and for the coming new year.

*The Westerly Historical Society
Executive Board*