



# Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

April 2018

## Westerly Historical Society Officers 2017-2018

**President**  
Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

**Vice President**  
Vacant

**Secretary**  
Maria L. Bernier

**Treasurer**  
Ann L. Smith

**Archivist**  
Zachary Garceau

**Babcock-Smith House  
Museum Liaison**  
Edward A. Fazio

**Membership Chair**  
Joanne Pendola

**Newsletter**  
Ann L. Smith

**Programs**  
Pamela J. Scott

**Publications Committee  
Chair**  
Maria L. Bernier

**Web Master**  
Maria L. Bernier

**Members At Large**  
Dwight C. Brown, Jr.  
John Leach  
Brenda Linton  
Thomas A. O'Connell

## Calendar of Events

**April 15, 2018 2:00 PM**

**Rebecca Nolan**

***"Westerly, Pawcatuck & the River that  
Changed the Landscape"***

This talk will explore the history of development and manufacturing along the Pawcatuck River and its mill villages- highlighting changes to the regional landscape as a result. Topics covered will include the construction of dams and canals, dredging and industrial operations on and along the shores of the river.

~ ~ ~

**Wednesday, May 9, 2018**

**Westerly Historical Society  
Annual Meeting and Dinner**

Cocktails 5:30 PM

Dinner 6:00 PM

Annual Recap of Activities

Financial Report-Presentation of Julia Award

Guest Speaker: Author Kelly Sullivan Pezza

(See page 6 For Details and Ticket Order Form)

~ ~ ~

**Lecture programs are held in the  
Carriage House  
of the**

**Babcock-Smith House Museum  
124 Granite Street, Westerly, RI  
Free Admission at all Programs**

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/>



## In this Issue

Editor's Notes.....Page 2

From the Archives .....Page 2

Program Review:  
Little-Known Secrets of the BSH...Page 3

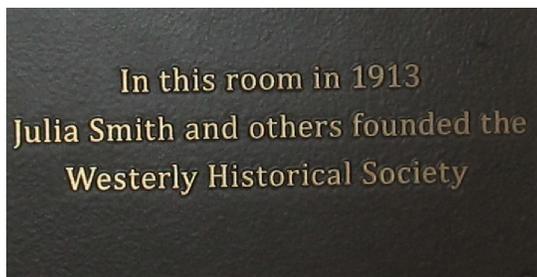
History of the People's Mission:  
Zachary Garceau..... Page 4

New Acquisitions: Listing.....Page 5

## Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

Another busy month has unfolded for all of us here at the Westerly Historical Society. Our president, Tom Gulluscio, took delivery on the brass plaque that now graces the wall of the parlor in the Babcock-Smith House Museum. This plaque commemorates the founding of the Westerly Historical Society at that location in 1913.



And speaking of signs, our new outdoor sign had blown down during one of the strong nor'easters that blew through our area this winter. We are happy to report that the sign has been repaired and reinforced and is once again in its rightful place. Many thanks are in order to board member John Leach for taking on this project and to our friend, Jed Schackner, for his craftsmanship.

The March 25 program presented by Ed Fazio and Tony Smith was well received, with every seat taken by the start of the talk. Our presenters donned period garb to enhance their theme and at least two dozen attendees toured the museum house at the end of the presentation. For those who missed it, a recap appears on the following page.

Our annual meeting and reception will take place on Wednesday, May 9. Kelly Sullivan Pezza, historian and author, will speak on the life the local recluse Esther Myers who died in 1898. If you have not yet ordered your tickets, please see Page 6 for details.

The Westerly Historical Society is looking forward to being an active participant in Westerly's 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations taking place throughout 2019. We will keep our readers up to date on our various undertakings as details become available.

## From the Archives

Zachary Garceau

Westerly Historical Society Archivist

*Each month, we will highlight one item or collection from the archives of the Westerly Historical Society. This month, our featured items are:*

### **Framed "Picture of Ministers [sic] Who Preached in Westerly in 1866"**

Upon viewing this item for the first time, the very first feature that is bound to pique anyone's interest is the frame itself. According to the note attached to the frame, it was created by hand by Captain Erastus Bliven (b. 1803) and was cut from cigar boxes. The sturdy wooden frame is impressive largely for its intricacy and quality.

Erastus Bliven was born in Westerly on 24 July 1803, the son of Daniel Bliven and Ruth Barber. On 5 November 1829, he married Phebe C. States. On 29 January 1842, Erastus joined the First Baptist Church in Westerly. During his lifetime, Erastus owned a variety of businesses, working as a 'market man,' a confectioner, and a saloon keeper. Erastus' wife, Phebe, died on 12 August 1846, leaving behind eight children. Erastus survived his wife by nearly fifty years, dying in Westerly on 26 January 1894 at the age of 90.

Within the frame is a composite of photographs of seven ministers who were preaching in Westerly in 1866, presumably when the photographs were taken and when the frame was created. The ministers depicted are:

#### **Reverend A.L. Whitman**

Whitman served as the pastor of the Congregational Church, which was organized in Westerly, but moved to Pawcatuck before 1878, for nineteen years and was the first ever installed by the church. The original meeting house was completed in 1849.

#### **Reverend John P. Hubbard**

Hubbard was the rector of the Christ Episcopal Church in 1866. The original Christ Episcopal Church was formed on 24 November 1834 and in 1872, a fire destroyed the original building, and a new church was rebuilt on the same site that year.

#### **Reverend E.H. Lewis**

Lewis, whose name is incorrectly recorded on the frame's caption as 'A.H. Lewis' was the pastor of the Pawcatuck Seventh Day Baptist Church, which despite its name, was located in Westerly, and was organized in 1840

*(Continued on Page 5)*

# *Program Review: Little-Known Secrets of the Babcock-Smith House Museum*

*By Ann L. Smith*

Back when Granite Street in Westerly was known as “King’s Highway,” Dr. Joshua Babcock enjoyed a comfortable living in what was arguably the finest house in the area at the time. Purchased by Orlando Smith in the mid 1800s, this structure, built in 1734, has a long and detailed history. Now known as the Babcock-Smith House Museum and operated by the Orlando Smith Trust, this property is well-known to locals and tourists alike. The town’s fifth-grade students enjoy tours each spring as part of their curriculum in local history.

The docents and other volunteers who make the museum tours possible provide a wealth of information for guests touring this home, but certain little-known details of the Babcock-Smith House have been kept private, until now. On March 25<sup>th</sup>, Edward Fazio and Anthony (Tony) Smith presented a fascinating lecture on the “off-exhibit” areas of the house, along with some interesting details about the rest of the place that are not usually included in the regular tours.

From the Roman-numbered rafters to the tunnel in the basement, program attendees were treated to a plethora of interesting facts surrounding the museum house structure. With a series of slides as visual aids, Ed Fazio explained how the roof frame had been assembled on the ground below, with workers matching the numbered ends of the beams. The hand-carved Roman numerals are visible on the rafters to this day, as the photographs showed. The Roman arch passageway in the museum’s basement serves to connect the two sides of lower level, eliminating the need to ascend to and traverse the ground floor in order to access an opposite side. Basements like the one in the Babcock-Smith House traditionally would have been bisected by foundational supporting structures, but thanks to the ingenuity of Dr. Babcock, the brick tunnel made for quick access to both sides of the basement, while still providing the required strength to support the building above. Contrary to local lore, the tunnel was not used to help escaping slaves. Ed Fazio was quick to point out that the wealthy and most outspoken abolitionists were the first to be searched in cases of runaway slaves, so the Babcock-Smith House could not have been a safe stop on the Underground Railroad.

The small rum keg on display in the keeping room has an interesting story. It was evidence in the trial of Thomas Mount who was the last man hanged in Washington County, Rhode Island. Stolen from Potter’s Store (in Westerly’s North end) at night, the death penalty was issued because the crime was considered to be a house-break rather than a shop-lifting incident. To prove its case, the prosecution had to establish that the Potter home and store were in fact one single structure, and so some architectural evidence was brought to bear. Mount was hanged at “Little Rest” (Kingston) in 1791, and the keg was donated to the museum many years later.



BASEMENT TUNNEL OF THE BABCOCK-SMITH HOUSE  
PHOTO: BABCOCK-SMITH HOUSE MUSEUM

The lecture continued as a blurry photo of a foggy street scene appeared on screen. The shot, looking out from an upstairs room, depicts not so much the weather outside, but a set of initials etched onto the glass within. Our program attendees learned that it was common for a newly engaged lady to prove her diamond’s authenticity by etching her initials into the glass of her bedroom window. If there were ever a broken engagement here, it is comforting to know that a gemstone probably wasn’t the cause.

The Babcock Smith House was the first in the area to be outfitted with indoor plumbing and electricity. The considerable wealth of the two families who lived there is evident among the furnishings on display, from the wide-width flooring planks to the imported hinges on the doors.

Even some of the people who are closely involved with the museum learned something new during this latest presentation. At least two dozen guests toured the museum following the lecture and were treated to even more interesting explanations and facts concerning this historic gem of Westerly.

# History of the People's Mission

By Zachary Garceau

In our previous issue, the collections of the People's Mission were highlighted in our "From the Archives" segment. This month, we will be providing additional context regarding the history of the People's Mission.

Very little is known about the earliest history of the People's Mission. The obituary of its long-time superintendent, Mrs. Dagmar Smith, suggests the Mission was founded in 1892. However, a summary of the Mission's second anniversary meeting was published by the *Westerly Sun* in 1907. While it is possible that there was an earlier mission which was formed in 1892, the subject of this month's piece is the People's Mission which was formed in 1905. According to their constitution which was approved on 11 March 1911, the Mission's purpose was "engaging in religious and charitable work of conducting religious services and of receiving, collecting, and distributing funds, clothing, food, fuel, and other necessities and supplies among the needy families and individuals of the community." The Mission also claimed that the religious work was evangelical and was conducted under "undenominational" lines. Still, membership in the Mission required one to be "a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ and [to have been] born again."

Recordkeeping in the Mission's earliest years was sparse, however, there were frequent accounts of the Mission's work published in the *Westerly Sun*. In 1907, the Mission's offerings totaled \$380.93 (equivalent to \$9,492.85 in 2017), a relatively small budget given the amount of work the Mission was able to do. That same year, meetings were held four times a week with an average of thirty people in attendance. There were also twelve weeks in which a meeting was held every night, showing the strong commitment of members to their cause. The Mission was headquartered in a wooden house on West Broad Street, just over the bridge in Pawcatuck, from 1913 until 1940.

In their annual report published by the *Sun* in 1907, the Mission presented a summary of their work, which indicated: "During the year very many drunkards and tramps have been into our meetings, some of course for financial aid and others really desiring spiritual help; some of them have been provided with food and many with a night's lodging

and breakfast." Another story tells of two boys who had run away from their home in Chelsea, Massachusetts and after finding the boys boarding and providing them with clothes, "they were in the meetings every night."

While the Mission's work focused largely on helping those in need in Westerly and the surrounding area, they also provided aid across the globe, with one worker having sent two barrels of clothes to missionaries in Barbados. Money was also given to missionary workers in Africa and Central America. The Mission also hosted a wide range of speakers, including those who performed missionary work overseas. In 1908, they hosted Reverend William Franklin, who served as a missionary in India for more than fifteen years. Franklin provided details about the state of India at the time, including some rhetoric which would be considered incorrect and offensive today, and appealed to the audience by proclaiming "Christian mothers, what do you think of this?"

While providing aid to those in need was always given as the primary goal of the People's Mission, they also took great pride in their evangelical work, as indicated by a 1908 journal entry by a member which states "a young man, Harry Perry, sends cheque [sic] for \$10, but best of all he expresses a desire to give himself up to service which is better than money." The 1908 annual report shows an even larger increase in services provided by the Mission, including holding over 400 meetings in Westerly and vicinity over the year (more than one every day). The Sunday school run by the Mission also had a student body numbering about seventy. Meetings were often held throughout Westerly, including four months in White Rock Hall, several weeks in Potter Hill, and Thursday evening meetings in the homes of families who requested them.

In October 1909, it was announced that the Mission's founder, Alexander Smith, for whom the position "City Missionary" was created, was leaving to work as an evangelistic worker for the Baptist Churches of Rhode Island. His wife, Mrs. Dagmar Smith, however, stayed until 1914, and later returned until the Mission closed its doors in 1947. At the

(Continued on Page 5)

## History of the People's Mission

(Continued from Page 4)

time of his departure, the Mission was performing at a high rate. In September 1909 alone, the Mission made 126 calls upon the dying, the sick, and the needy, and gave out 300 garments and ten pairs of shoes.

The amount of work completed by the Mission steadily increased over the ensuing years. Between the years 1915 and 1935 (the only period for which records appear to exist), the Mission gave out 71,104 garments, spent \$27,773.80 (nearly half a million dollars in 2017), and made 9,851 house calls (an average of 492 per year). While the available records serve as a great indicator of the sheer immensity of the work performed by the Mission, they also show a steady shift in the Mission's goals. For instance, house calls saw a 273% drop from 1915 to 1935, while garments given out increased almost 400% between 1919 and 1932. The records also paint an interesting picture of the impact of the work done by the Mission. For instance, in May 1944, the Mission gave out cash to a "Mrs. R. Carter" with the reason given as "husband's death," and they provided cash to Ellison "Tarzan" Brown, the former Boston Marathon winner and Olympian, who was out of work.

The People's Mission was also well-known for their annual donation of Christmas and Thanksgiving baskets to the needy of the community. Once again, the later years proved to be the organization's strongest, as they gave out 200 Christmas baskets in 1935, compared to the 18 they were able to provide in 1919.

The People's Mission closed its doors for good in 1948, although the final records available date to March 1946, suggesting a decreased role in the community prior to their dissolution. The incredible impact of the People's Mission on the town of Westerly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is a tradition which should be remembered fondly.

## From the Archives

(Continued from Page 2)

### Reverend Frederic Denison

Denison was a minister of the First Baptist Church in Westerly, which was organized on 16 September 1835. Denison's first term lasted from 1847 to 15 November 1854, however, he later returned to serve a second term, which was on-going in 1866. Frederic Denison is also noted for being a local historian, having written the work *Westerly and Its Witnesses* in 1878.

### Reverend John Taylor

Taylor served as the Reverend of the Christian Church, known locally as "The Chapel." The church was dedicated on 31 January 1844. Taylor was the church's second pastor.

### Reverend George S. Alexander

Alexander was the first pastor of the Methodist Church, which first formed in 1846. For a time, the church existed "only as a class" (Denison, 200), but prior to 1878, they had a revival, and constructed a church building for worship.

### Reverend Alfred B. Burdick

Burdick served as the pastor of the Pawcatuck Seventh Day Baptist Church prior to the parsonage of E.H. Lewis.

---

### Acquisitions

This month, the Westerly Historical Society received the following items:

- 1) The 1925, 1926, 1928, 1929 and 1930 editions of "The Senior," the yearbook of Westerly High School, donated by John Leach.
- 2) A collection of photographs donated by Jane Maxson which depict Watch Hill before and after the Hurricane of 1938 as well as the Sisson Block Fire of 1938.
- 3) A large collection of items donated by Ellen Madison relating to Westerly High School, including:
  - Issues of the *WHS Digest* and *The Barker* newspaper dated 1962-1963
  - Newspaper clippings relating to the High School in the 1960s
  - Programs and other items relating to reunions of the class of 1963
  - Programs from various events at the school 1961-1963
  - Program from Westerly vs. Stonington football, 1963
  - Correspondence dated 1961-1963
  - Items from Babcock Junior High School, 1957-1960

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



**Westerly Historical Society Annual Meeting and Dinner Ticket Order Form**

**Location: Venice Restaurant**  
**165 Shore Road, Westerly RI 02891**

Please send me \_\_\_\_\_ tickets for the  
Westerly Historical Society Annual Meeting  
and Reception on May 9, 2018 @ \$28.00 ea.

Enclosed please find my check for \$\_\_\_\_\_

Name(s)\_\_\_\_\_

Address\_\_\_\_\_

City\_\_\_\_\_

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

**Please indicate your entrée preference(s):**

Chicken Piccata \_\_\_\_\_

Baked Cod \_\_\_\_\_

**Featured Speaker:**  
***Kelly Sullivan Pezza***  
***on the***

***Life of Westerly Recluse, Esther Myers***

**Cocktails at 5:30 PM**

**Dinner will be served at 6:00 PM**

Send this form with your check or money order  
before April 28th to:

**Westerly Historical Society**  
**PO Box 91**  
**Westerly, RI 02891**

**Internet orders may be placed on our website:**  
<http://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/annual-meeting>

or click on the words “**Annual Meeting**” from our  
home page.