



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

May 2018

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Annual Meeting Held: Officers Installed, Awards Conferred

Celebrating its one hundred fifth year, the Westerly Historical Society gathered at the Venice Restaurant in Westerly on May 9th to conduct its annual meeting and member reception. Forty seven members and guests gathered for the usual cocktails, dinner, business meeting, and speaker, but a new item on the agenda attracted some added folks who then received a first-hand glimpse of what the Westerly Historical Society is all about. The Society was also gratified to have as a distinguished guest, Rui Almeida, the newly installed planner for the Town of Westerly.

Earlier this year, the Babcock-Smith House Museum in collaboration with the Westerly Historical Society, reviewed nominations for their first-ever local history award. Unlike the *Julia* award, the local history award is open to students and adults alike, and is awarded for a specific achievement in or contribution to our local history. Instead of a trophy, the winner receives an unrestricted cash prize of \$500. This year the judges announced a tie and the prize was shared by two winners. One recipient was Alex Berardo, a graduate of Westerly High School and current college student, who was nominated for his research and lecture on Westerly's architectural treasures. Alex presented a program based on his research at the Westerly Library last year as part of the library's 125th anniversary celebration.

The history award was shared by four docents of the Babcock-Smith House Museum for their group project involving historic textiles. Nominated for their five-year long project, Mary B. Cool, Janice B. Tunney, Wanda A. Butler, and Jacqueline Brennan were chosen for their archiving and restoration of hundreds of pieces of clothing and antique household items. The four also coordinated local participation in South County Sampler Initiative funded by the RI
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ATLANTIC AVENUE PRE-1938
PHOTO: THE WESTERLY SUN

Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

When I was a small child my two older brothers and I would often take in the Saturday matinee show at one of the two downtown theaters in our home town of Hackensack, New Jersey. How we wound up with two theaters, one across the street from the other, I'll never know. But I didn't care, either. Both were built in the traditional grand style of the early twentieth century with a requisite chandelier hanging at center-ceiling. Both had mezzanines and both sold all the usual refreshments. Admission was fifty cents and a box of Sno-Caps cost a dime. The Fox theater was on one side, and the Oritani (named for Chief Oritam) on the other.

In those days we'd sometimes sit part-way through the second showing if we'd arrived too late to catch the beginning of the feature film. As long as we came back by dinnertime, no one was any worse for it. The adventures of the *Swiss Family Robinson* and the dramatic trials of *Pollyanna* kept my rapt attention for hours. Although I couldn't quite follow the cerebral messages conveyed in *The Time Machine*, I still remember clearly how Rod Taylor and Sebastian Cabot debated whether one could control their destiny. It wasn't as much their subject matter but they way they debated this abstract concept that held my interest. "This is how genteel people amuse themselves," I thought.

And so it was as forty seven erudite individuals gathered for the 105th annual meeting of the Westerly Historical Society on May 9, 2018. Ever cordial and congenial, our guests shared details of their latest endeavors, exchanged resources, and pondered a few abstract concepts themselves. We weren't halfway through our salad course when the folks at my table and I were debating whether animals adhere to a moral code. This came after a lively exchange on the latest non-fiction books. Genteel, indeed!

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This month we bring you an abbreviated edition of *Westerly's Witness*. A short recap of our April program appears on the next page, and sadly, remembrances of two of our beloved members who died recently appear on page 4. Look for a full edition in September when we will resume our regular issues. We are planning another exciting season of programs and articles as we continue to fulfill our mission of "preserving memories of the past."

Annual Meeting

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Council for the Humanities. The team also designed a museum exhibit entitled "Don't Leave Home Without It," which showcased women's fashion accessories from the Babcock-Smith House Museum's collection.



HISTORY AWARD WINNERS MARY B. COOL, JANICE B. TUNNEY, WANDA A. BUTLER AND JACQUELINE BRENNAN
(PHOTO: MARIA BERNIER)

Roberta Mudge Humble, current and founding president of Westerly Armory Restoration, Inc. was given the *Julia Award* for her past and continuing efforts to preserve the armory and Westerly's history at the People's Museum, which is located at the armory. A Westerly native, Roberta Mudge Humble has enjoyed a lengthy career as a college professor, author and historical lecturer.

The Westerly Historical Society unanimously confirmed four members of the executive board who ran unopposed this year. They are, Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr., President, Thomas A. O'Connell, Vice-President, Maria L. Bernier, Secretary, and Ann L. Smith, Treasurer. A brief review of financial statements, programs, and newsletters published during 2017 ended the business portion of the meeting.

Kelly Sullivan Pezza, local historian, author and featured speaker, rounded out the evening with her lecture on the life and death of Esther Myers, a wealthy Westerly recluse who died in a house fire near Elm Street in 1898. Kelly Pezza is the author of five books including *Murder and Mayhem in Washington County, Rhode Island*. Her works are all available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

Program Review: Westerly, Pawcatuck, and the River that Changed the Landscape (Or, “How Canal Street Got Its Name”)

By Ann L. Smith

Have you ever wondered how Canal Street got its name? The answer is quite simple, but it took an expert to provide the backstory along with a host of other interesting tidbits about the Pawcatuck River that were presented in our April program. Last month, landscape architect Rebecca Nolan spoke on the history of the Pawcatuck River and the industries that flourished in the lower part of the river over time. Rebecca Nolan is a recent graduate of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Advanced Studies Program, where she completed her thesis work.

In the October, 2017 issue of *Westerly's Witness*, the feature article covered some of the early history of the Pawcatuck River, especially with regard to the abundance of shad and alewife as important food sources. (See “Bradford Dam: A History Told in the Murmurings of a River.”) And while the Bradford Dam story focused on the Bradford Dyeing Association, it is important to note that the Pawcatuck River provided power to several mills along its route. The river also played a key part in the movement of goods and people throughout Westerly and Pawcatuck for most of the nineteenth century.

Years ago, near the site of the current-day Westerly Yacht Club, stood the Westerly Town Dock. It was also referred to as the “landing.” The river is more narrow at that spot, and the swift current resulting from the closeness of the banks gave the area the nickname “Hell’s Gate.” Because of difficulty in navigating easily through Hell’s Gate, goods were customarily offloaded at the town dock then sent by land to their final destinations. In time and with some dredging, boats brought goods and passengers as far as the Broad Street Bridge (a.k.a. “Pawcatuck Bridge,” also another name for downtown Westerly.)

The White Rock Company, which operated a mill further upriver, submitted a proposal before the State of Rhode Island to bring goods even further upstream by means of a canal to be built at the mill’s expense. Construction of the canal was approved and it ran from the bridge area to just north of what is now Grey Sail Brewing Company on Canal Street. The canal was 4,500 feet long and forty feet wide. It had a draft of twelve feet and was completed in 1827.

Another Stillmanville mill on the Connecticut side of the Pawcatuck River sued the White Rock Company for diverting the water current and



RHODE ISLAND STATE ATLAS
D. G. BEERS & CO., 1870

diminishing their capacity to generate power. The case was a complicated one due in part because it involved two states and because the amount of power lost could not be definitively proven from a scientific standpoint. The case was thrown out and the White Rock Company made good use of its canal for many years. The canal was abandoned in 1867 and eventually filled in by the railroad in 1911.

It is hard to imagine that what is now the rear parking area of the Jonnycake Center (note the circled area above) was once a ponded area below Marriott Hill. In fact, soil from Marriot Hill was used to fill in this part of the canal which ran behind what was then known as the New England Silk Mill.

Rebecca Nolan concluded her talk by reminding her audience that history plays an important part in designing current-day structures, especially when a canal such as Westerly’s was part of a landscape that no one now living can remember.

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In Memoriam



Dwight C. Brown, Jr., 90, of Ashaway Road, Bradford, passed away at his home on Monday, April 16, 2018. He was the husband of the late Anna Irene (Riley) Brown who predeceased him on April 30, 2015.

Dwight was a prolific author, tireless researcher, and a popular speaker at the Westerly Historical Society. He was the recipient of the Society's *Julia Award* in 2017 as well as the featured guest at that year's annual meeting. He was also known for his oil paintings and was an accomplished cabinet maker.

Dwight is survived by his brother Robert Brown and sister Linda Murano, five children, ten grandchildren, four great-grandchildren, and several nieces and nephews. He was predeceased by a daughter, Pamela Brown, who succumbed to a lengthy childhood illness many years ago.

Barbara J. Benson, 91, died on April 22, 2018 in Westerly, R.I. She was the daughter of the late Farquhar and Mary (Carr) Smith. She was predeceased by her brother, Farquhar "Bud" Smith.



Barbara worked for many years at Ashaway Line and Twine as an Office Manager before retiring. She was a volunteer at the Westerly Public Library, docent at the Babcock Smith House, member of the Westerly Historical Society, and a member of Christ Church.

She is survived by her sons Robert E. Benson of Laramie, Wyoming and Thomas E. Benson and his wife, Judith of Westerly. She was the loving grandmother of Thomas, Robert, and Stuart Benson and Tanner Hurley, as well as three great-grandsons.

Donations in Barbara's memory may be made to the Westerly Public Library, 44 Broad St. Westerly, R.I., 02891.