



# Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

September 2018

## Westerly Historical Society Officers 2018-2019

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## Calendar of Events

September 23 at 2:00 P.M.

**"Outback"**

(or "Is this trip necessary?")

Presented by

**Babcock-Smith House Museum**

Virginia Williams

will present her entertaining program on the  
history and lore of the outhouse.

Admission is free.

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## Westerly Historical Society Programs 2018-2019

This season's program schedule is near  
completion! Check this space in our  
October issue for an updated listing of  
programs and events.

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**Lecture 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

(Except as noted)

Memberships Available at:

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

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## Editor's Notes

*Ann L. Smith*

As the first bulk-mailed holiday catalogs begin to arrive we are reminded that summer, for the most part, is done. Soon 2018 will exist only as a memory: another slice of history logged together with all the other years of our past. Between now and the dawn of 2019 we will reflect and celebrate and ring in another chapter of our ever-unfolding lives.

There is something about the tune “Auld Lang Syne” that stirs at once hope and nostalgia, optimism and melancholy. What is it about marking another year that causes all these things to well up within us? Is it just the sense that we too will be nothing but a blip in the long history of this place when all is said and done? Or can we imagine that we will have somehow made a lasting impression on our world?

As historians we share a unique role which is quite distinct from all other areas of academia. We are charged with preserving the past, indeed, but we also assume the responsibility of recording the history of our “history.” For those who have never pondered the meaning of this redundant phrase, what we chronicle includes not only dates, names, places, and artifacts, but the preservation efforts of those who went before us. We are drawn to examine the methods and lives of the historians who preceded us. We ponder their tireless efforts and indefatigable ability to research, record, footnote, and index their data without the use of any modern technology.

In Westerly, our predecessor historians paused each half-century to celebrate and share our local history with the community at large. From pageants to pie-eating, symphony and song, as a people we have stopped and remembered where we have been, and dreamt for a while about where our endeavors might lead us in the years that lie ahead.

And so we find ourselves on the eve of yet another anniversary, pondering our collective legacy and looking back on all the landmarks and milestones of Westerly's history. As we look back over 350 years we begin to ask ourselves, “Who are we?” and “What defines us as a community?” We examine those older celebrations at 200 years, 250, or 300 and ask, “What were we most proud of at the time?”

The answers will depend in part on the “lens” through which we look. Perspective can certainly shade our opinion of ourselves, no doubt. But rose-

colored or not, certain facts and events remain unchanged. As a whole they define Westerly as a place like no other – a singular community built with an indomitable sense of courage, independence, and dignity for all. We are a people of diverse backgrounds united by a spirit of equality and inclusiveness. We possess a rugged individualism that has fostered enterprise, invention, and industry. Above all, Westerly is a place of caring where strangers still talk with each other and contribute to the common good. Westerly claims a strong sense of community where a certain shared identity continues to shine through.

But the fact that we hold a common vision does not equate to homogeneity given all the other things that define us. The ties that bind us transcend any race, nationality, religion, or lifestyle. This town is best defined by its collective compassion and its pluck; its sense of “can-do” and its appreciation of all that is good, from preserving our natural world, our arts, and indeed our history.

We hope our readers will join with us over the coming year as we celebrate Westerly's 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its incorporation. The Westerly Historical Society is collaborating with our partners at the Babcock-Smith House Museum in developing a library exhibit for the spring of 2019. Independent of this library exhibit, the Ocean Community Chamber of Commerce, located in Westerly, oversees the Town of Westerly 350<sup>th</sup> Committee. Information of their planned events can be found at <https://chambermaster.blob.core.windows.net/userfiles/UserFiles/chambers/726/File/March2018newsletter.pdf>

We will keep our readers informed of all things “anniversary” as more details become available.

We hope you will join us for our monthly programs and we invite our readers to contribute to *Westerly's Witness* with their comments, questions, and research by emailing us at [whstreasurer@gmail.com](mailto:whstreasurer@gmail.com). Please visit our website at <https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/> for additional contact information and archived issues of our newsletter.



## Program Review: “Alfie” Comes Home to Show off Makeover

By Ann L. Smith

What can only be described as a labor of love perhaps best defines the story of a hundred-year-old fire truck that rose from the ashes and reappeared in its original home.

The Watch Hill Fire Department boasted a packed house on July 31 as Richard Froh, Jack Spratt, and Robert Peacock gave an informative talk about the antique American LaFrance pumper that has been in our area now for over a hundred years. Froh, a Connecticut resident and member of the Groton Long Point Fire Department has been leading the effort to restore this 1917 classic truck that began its “career” here in Westerly over a hundred years ago.

This fire truck was purchased by the Watch Hill Fire Department the year after the great Watch Hill Fire of 1916. In that devastating blaze, three landmark hotels and two cottages burned in a fast-moving inferno that the *Westerly Sun* called “the greatest catastrophe” in Watch Hill history. The damage was estimated at over \$200,000 which is the equivalent of \$5 million in today’s economy.

Although assisted by firefighters from Mystic and Pawcatuck, the fire was overwhelming for the crew of more than a hundred men who bravely fought to extinguish it. Many were seriously injured including two from Mystic who suffered serious burns to the face and hands as a result of an explosion. Legend has it that they jumped into Little Narragansett Bay to gain relief right after the blast.

The Watch Hill Fire Department had been in existence some fifteen years at the time of the fire, having been formed in 1901. Its main piece of equipment was a pickup truck outfitted with 2,000 feet of hose, nozzles, and some fire extinguishers. The Westerly Fire Department had just acquired two new steam-powered hose wagons, but refused to lend them into service on the night of the great fire. The Pawcatuck Fire Department sent its 1913 chemical car and the Mystic Fire Department arrived with a 1913 American LaFrance pumper.

In the weeks and months that followed, efforts were undertaken to expand the Watch Hill Fire Department. The Watch Hill Improvement Society determined that Watch Hill needed an American LaFrance pumper, or “Alfie” of its own. (The nickname “Alfie,” derives from its brand: American LaFrance and is commonly used to refer to any of the vehicles manufactured by the company). At the same



RICHARD FROH, JUNE FROH, AND LINDY MARSHALL OF GROTON LONG POINT FIRE DEPARTMENT WITH THE 1917 AMERICAN LAFRANCE FIRE TRUCK. PHOTO: ANN L. SMITH

time the first Watch Hill firehouse was established in a two-bay garage on Bay Street. A 1917 American LaFrance Triple Combination 750 gallon-per-minute pumper was purchased at a cost of \$9,500 and delivered about six months after the Great Fire. The unit was not officially “accepted” however until six members of the Watch Hill Fire Department had been duly trained, certified by the manufacturer’s representative, and a suitable maintenance facility (the Watch Hill Garage) approved for servicing the apparatus. Alfie is believed to be Watch Hill’s first motorized piece of fire equipment and the first motorized pumper in the Town of Westerly.

Alfie served the Watch Hill Fire Department for nearly forty years. Its last known use is believed to have been at a brush fire in nearby Charlestown that lasted three days. The unit was used to draw water out of a pond but the pump became damaged from sucking up sand in the process. According to Richard Froh, the pump was removed and placed outside the firehouse to be picked up for repair. Unfortunately, the all-bronze pump went missing, undoubtedly stolen for its scrap value, and was not replaced.

In the 1950s Walt Mosher of the Groton Long Point Fire Department aquired Alfie, without its pump, for his antique auto museum. The Groton Long Point Fire Department “adopted” Alfie from time to time as a parade prop and eventually purchased the rig outright for \$500 in 1966. Sporadic work was performed in attempts to restore Alfie but progress was slow. The Watch Hill Fire Department offered to buy Alfie back in 1975 but Groton Long Point voted against the measure. Eventually, after realizing that the truck was becoming a liability, it was sold for \$1,000 in July of 1980.

(continued on Page 4)

## Alfie comes Home

(Continued from Page 3)



WESTERLY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBER, JANE MAXSON POSES WITH "SPARKY" THE FIREHOUSE MASCOT AT THE WATCH HILL FIREHOUSE.

(PHOTO: ANN SMITH)

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By 1985, the Groton Long Point Fire Department became interested once again in finding its old friend,

Alfie, but no one seemed to know its whereabouts. There had been a failed plan to use it as a prop for the salad bar in the Fisherman Restaurant (now latitude 49) at Mystic Seaport, but Alfie seemed to be lost. Within two years of the renewed interest by Groton Long Point however, Alfie was discovered sitting in a garage at Seaport Marine in Mystic. The owner at the time, Jim Woviotis, was persuaded to donate Alfie back to the Groton Long Point Fire Department at which time repair efforts began in earnest.

Committee members traveled to the Hudson, NY Fire Museum, and to Croton, NY to view other restored American LaFrance pumpers, and plans were made to rebuild the motor, the radiator, and the engine which was no longer working. Years of careful research by Froh and others ensued. A cache of valuable parts was located and procured with the help of Groton Long Point resident Don Senecal, and through several years of disassembly, reassembly, sand-blasting and decorating, Alfie took its rightful place in the local July Fourth parade, running under its own power in 1993.

Restoration at that point was far from finished, however. Since then, Alfie has continued to acquire missing parts, win awards, and most importantly, bring smiles to thousands of faces, young and old, according to Froh. More than \$25,000 has been spent on hundreds of parts for Alfie. Dozens of volunteers have donated over one thousand hours to return this rare piece of firefighting equipment to its original state.

As the lecture came to a close, a rumor was floating that Alfie may indeed return to Watch Hill permanently sometime in the near future. For now the public must wait to see if Alfie comes home for good.

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

Zachary J. Garceau

This year, the Westerly Historical Society lost one of its most esteemed members and the most prolific historian Westerly has ever known, Dwight C. Brown Jr. Over the course of several decades, Dwight collected, catalogued, studied, and compiled an enormous amount of historical materials which were recently donated to the Society by his family. The Westerly Historical Society would like to thank the family of Dwight C. Brown Jr. for their generous gift which included archival supplies which will ensure the collection will be preserved for years to come. Included among the items donated are:

- More than 10,000 35 mm photographic slides covering a wide variety of subject areas
- Countless one-of-a-kind items relating to the history and day-to-day operations of the Bradford Dyeing Association, where Dwight spent his entire career
- Over 100 binders filled with research materials from the many projects Dwight completed
- Several one-of-a-kind historic books which provide previously unavailable information about Westerly and the people who shaped its history
- Many more items of great historical value

Next month's newsletter will feature an article delving into the Dwight C. Brown Jr. collection. In this upcoming article I will discuss the most unique items in this collection, the process involved in cataloging WHS' single largest donation in our 105-year history, what I've learned from this endeavor, and most importantly, what the collection means for local history.



1917 AMERICAN LAFRANCE FIRE TRUCK  
PHOTO: WATCH HILL FIRE DEPARTMENT

## ***Program Review: Patricia Schaefer on the Diary of Joshua Hempstead***

*By Ann L. Smith*

Anyone who has ever had the pleasure of examining, or better yet, owning an antique diary, knows the thrill of examining its contents. Aside from the (oftentimes) beautiful script flowing across yellowed pages, the vocabulary and events seem peculiar and distant. The strange language and references to activities abandoned long ago draws the reader in. We become absorbed in knowing what was meant by expressions such as “running lines,” or “being published,” as when two people are “published.” (The former is a reference to land surveying. The latter is an expression relating to the publishing of marriage bans.)

Although an eighteenth century diary is certainly considered a rare find, one mustn't conclude that keeping a diary was not a common practice in centuries past. According to the website *Acculturated.com*, “In earlier centuries, the point of keeping a diary was to give a minute account of yourself to God. Diary-keeping was closely related to the growth of Protestantism...Self-recording signaled religious self-inspection.” Indeed, Benjamin Franklin, who visited Westerly many times, recommended logging “thirteen virtues a day.” Thus we begin to understand why these old writings contain such minutia of daily life.

In the case of Joshua Hempstead of New London, uncovering his diary was more than a glimpse into a common practice of the time, for the man was anything but common. Patricia Schaefer, of the New London County Historical Society, shared several excerpts of the Hempstead diary with attendees at the Carriage House during her recent talk. Our audience learned that Joshua Hempstead was a prominent figure of the time who had several careers both public and private.

The surviving part of this remarkable document begins in 1711, with almost daily entries until November 3, 1758. Hempstead recorded everything from the weather, his business activities, births, deaths, baptisms, his travels, and many other events that made up his daily life. Hempstead was elected to town offices and was a representative to the General Assembly of Connecticut. He was a justice of the peace, wrote wills for his neighbors, and acted as a business agent for the Winthrop family.

Our speaker, Patricia Schaefer, became involved

with the Hempstead diary in 1993. Since then she wrote the introduction to the seven hundred page 1999 edition of *The Diary of Joshua Hempstead 1711-1758* published by the New London County Historical Society. Her book, *A Useful Friend: A Companion to the Joshua Hempstead Diary 1711-1758*, was published by the NLCHS and won the Homer Babbidge Award in 2009. Her latest diary project was proofreading the published diary against the manuscript. The resulting changes and additions added seventeen pages to the upcoming edition and has necessitated a complete re-indexing of the volume due to repagination of the content.

Aside from its value in offering glimpses into daily life of the eighteenth century, the greater treasure of this volume is that it serves as a primary source for countless scholars, genealogists, and historians who search for dates, names, and locations in New London County. The diary of Joshua Hempstead undoubtedly contains thousands of minutiae that cannot be found elsewhere.

As for the man himself, he continued to chronicle his life almost until his death at age eighty. Abandoned only weeks before he died, Hempstead's diary ends with certain accounts of a deep pain in his “bowel.” The presumption exists that he was simply too ill to write during his last days. A posthumous entry by one of his sons indicates that Mr. Hempstead has died and gives the date: December 22, 1758.

Joshua Hempstead was a well-known figure in his day. His wife was the former Abigail Bailey of Long Island. Together they had six sons and three daughters. The house where Hempstead lived still stands at 11 Hempstead Street in New London. If we could put the significance of Hempstead's diary into context it may be said that his writings are as valuable to New Londoners as might be a diary by Joshua Babcock to Westerly's people. It is a foundational piece in our understanding of the customs, culture, and history in eighteenth century southern New England.

The Westerly Historical Society is grateful that Patricia Schaefer shared her time with us. We look forward to a return visit in the future when we can continue to explore Hempstead's amazing life.

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



## Memorial Dedicated to Dwight C. Brown, Jr. and Anna Brown



Nina Wright (left) reference librarian at the Westerly Library poses with (from left to right) Maria L. Bernier, Westerly Historical Society secretary, Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr., Westerly Historical Society president, and Steve and Dwight Brown, sons of the late Dwight C. Brown Jr. who died earlier this year and Anna Brown (d. 2015). The group gathered for the dedication of a new table given by WHS to the Westerly Library Special Collections Department, Local History Room in the Browns' memory. A plaque with a permanent inscription is shown at the center of the photo.