



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

November-December 2018

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Calendar of Events

Saturday, December 8, 2018

Babcock-Smith House Museum Holiday Boutique

9:00 AM to 1:00 PM

A holiday marketplace of cookie platters, custom decorated cookies and other baked goods, handmade decorative greens, artisan-crafted soaps, hearty soups to go and other food items ...and the ever-popular basket raffle!

<http://www.babcocksmithhouse.org/BabcockSmithHouse/events.htm> for latest information

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SAVE THE DATE

Sunday, January 27, 2019

Westerly Historical Society Members Only Potluck Dinner and Research Sharing Event

Please bring your choice of appetizers, entrees, sides, or desserts. Beverages 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: whsprogram@gmail.com or phone

(401)-741-8705.

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Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

Last month, we were pleased to welcome back Ann Johnson of the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association who presented an informative talk on the recent fundraising efforts and challenges faced at the Watch Hill Light and its museum. A recap of her presentation begins on the following page.

Due to scheduling issues, there will be no lecture program during the month of November. However, Pamela Scott, our program chairperson, reports that the spring lineup will include more of the engaging and informative content that we all have been enjoying in recent months. As a reminder, videos of our past lectures are available on our website at <https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/events/>.

Did you know that Westerly boasts a total of three museums within its borders? In addition to the museum at the Watch Hill Lighthouse and the Babcock-Smith House with its permanent granite exhibit, the People's Museum at the Westerly Armory is open on Mondays and Thursdays from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M., and on some holiday Mondays. The Armory also has a library of military books, books about Rhode Island, and books on the Westerly-Pawcatuck community.

The Westerly Armory is not just military. Its museum features memorabilia from the community, and items which have come across time. The military collection is principally showing uniforms and artifacts from community members who have served our nation. The "Westerly Women's Corner" features some of the accomplished women of the community. A sports area displays local sports teams and players from the past to the present. There is the Navy Corner, Korea Corner, Coast Guard Corner, hand-made model planes of WWII, the Vietnam Corner, and much more.

The president of Westerly Armory Restoration and president of the Armory's executive board is none other than our 2018 *Julia Award* recipient, Roberta Mudge Humble. To learn more about the Westerly Armory, please visit their website at <http://westerlyarmory.com/>. A short interview with Roberta Mudge Humble can be found at http://traffic.libsyn.com/westerlywaves/WW_Ep2_Westerly_Armory_-Humble.mp4.

Our partners at the Babcock-Smith House Museum are gearing up for a wonderful holiday "boutique." The dates and time for this event are listed on Pages 1 and 7 of this issue. All proceeds benefit the Babcock-Smith House museum, so we hope you will come out and join our friends for this seasonal event.

In January we are anticipating the fourth annual, members only, potluck dinner and research sharing event. The date is subject to change if inclement weather strikes, so we will re-schedule if necessary. Please know that **not everyone who attends is expected to present a topic**. We need listeners as well as speakers, so please consider joining us for a relaxing afternoon with friends as we share our most interesting topics and yummiest recipes. See Page 1 for details.

We accepted several donated items last month as additions to our archives (see Page 4). Our archivist, Zachary J. Garceau continues to dedicate several hours per week of his personal time to maintain our holdings while continuing his work on the upcoming exhibit at the Westerly Library. We wish to express our deepest appreciation for his continued dedication to the Westerly Historical Society and for furthering our mission in this way.

Just a quick reminder, membership renewal letters were mailed during October. If you have not already done so, please renew your membership by December 31st. If you like, you can renew electronically by logging on to our website at <https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/membership/> and renew using a credit card or PayPal.

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, the entire executive board wishes you our sincerest and warmest blessings now and for the coming new year.



Review: Ann Johnson Updates Attendees on the Watch Hill Lighthouse

By Ann L. Smith

Perhaps the most photographed structure in Westerly is the Watch Hill Lighthouse. It is arguably the most popular subject for fine artists as well. Whether captured in oil, acrylic, watercolor or charcoal, the image of the Watch Hill Light is nearly synonymous with Westerly. The lighthouse adorns the pillows, pot-holders, and placemats sold along Bay Street adding even more fame to its iconic charm. Perched atop Watch Hill Point, sporting a square (not round) tower, and witness to some of the most notable shipwrecks along the New England Coast, the Watch Hill Lighthouse exudes a certain character and mystery to all who have seen it.

Ann Johnson previously lectured at the Westerly Historical Society in 2015. Still in the throes of having the seawall rebuilt after Hurricane Sandy, Ann then took the time to outline for us the detailed history of the Watch Hill Lighthouse from its beginnings. The most significant change in our time was the formation of the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association, formed in 1986. It was in that year that the Association assumed the operation the Watch Hill Light as a lessee of the United States Coast Guard. That same year the fourth order Fresnel Lens, which had been installed in 1898, was retired and replaced with the current VRB-25 rotating beacon. The Fresnel lens stands on display in the adjacent lighthouse museum.

Maintaining the small museum at Watch Hill Point presents a set of unique challenges due to the environmental conditions, its space constraints, and its proximity to the home of celebrity singer-songwriter Taylor Swift. The first lighthouse museum on the point was in the old oil building, but was moved at some point to the fog signal building, erected in 1909. With space still at a premium, Ann Johnson faces ongoing challenges related to displaying the Lighthouse collection of paintings, photographs, and other items of interest. Some of her immediate issues concern how to choose what goes on display and how best to display it; how many items can be reasonably kept; and, how the Association should assign monetary values to the items it owns.

Another challenge for Ann Johnson and her group concerns how best to restore and maintain the

buildings on Watch Hill Point. The humid conditions and constant exposure to wind, rain, and sea spray make caring for the structures a specialized job. For example, the museum has a north-facing door whose ornamental brick-work above the transom needs repair. The paint in that area peels easily and the brick is somewhat weakened. Moisture continues to affect the plaster as well. Luckily, the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission has already helped to restore the property by means of a grant following Hurricane Sandy. In exchange for this funding, however, the RIHP&HC now has twenty-year easement on the property.

The lighthouse tower interior, closed to the public, is also in need of restoration to the brick surfaces. To date the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association (WHLKA) has experimented with media blasting and specialized paint. The round brick used in the tower's construction needs repointing which involves repairing and replacing the mortar holding them in place. The United States Coast Guard will need to consult on the best methods to use in restoring the tower's interior. The windows too will soon need attention.

In 1961 the lighthouse keeper's residence was divided into two apartments; one on the upper floor and one on the ground floor. Under the current lease issued to the WHLKA by the Coast Guard, these apartments cannot be leased for profit. As a result, the first floor of the residence has been converted into much-needed additional space for the Association, and the occupant of the second floor, Robert Peacock, has assumed the title of Property Manager. Bob Peacock, as many already know, is the chief of the Watch Hill Fire Department and a member of the Westerly Historical Society.

Each spring the Watch Hill Lighthouse is host to the Westerly Middle School students of teacher Peter Fusaro, who encourages his students' understanding of local history and area lighthouses. In May of this year Mr. Fusaro's students enjoyed an informative trip under sunny skies at Watch Hill Point. A favorite museum attraction of the students is an antique ship's telegraph whose bell rings when activated. On-board telegraphs of this kind were used to enable communication between a ship's pilot house and engine room.

(Continued on Page 4)

Watch Hill Lighthouse

(Continued from Page 3)

Taylor Swift's Watch Hill home overlooks Watch Hill Point and has drawn the attention of curiosity-seekers since the singer moved in. Uninvited late-night guests have occasionally been escorted off the lighthouse property. Perhaps not all were trying to get a glimpse of the famous star, rather, they sought to enjoy the stars and moon overhead. Either way, the WHLKA seeks to maintain the quiet enjoyment of the point for the good of the lighthouse property and that of all its area neighbors.

In addition to juggling structural maintenance concerns, hosting tours and visitors, and maintaining security at the Watch Hill Lighthouse, fundraising remains a key aspect of running the WHLKA. On July 7, 2018, the lighthouse hosted its first major fundraiser in collaboration with the Watch Hill Preservation Society. Happily, the July fundraiser generated about ten times what it takes to run the lighthouse for one year. While the event was an overwhelming success, long-range strategic planning involves certain considerations. Among these are the level to which the lighthouse ought to collaborate with other nonprofits. For example, the Watch Hill Preservation Society shares a common goal with the lighthouse of caring for the natural environment, as does the East Beach Association and the Watch Hill Improvement and Memorial Society, but each organization exists with distinct missions.

Financial concerns aside, the Watch Hill Preservation Society has a naturalist among its ranks whose role is to provide up-close learning about the local landscape. He is able to offer his expertise at the lighthouse on all the area's wildlife from bats to butterflies and more. But staffing all the other positions at the lighthouse remains an enormous challenge. A security guard is present at the entrance to Lighthouse Road, but is only on duty during tourist season. Museum docents are drawn from the volunteer staff of the Watch Hill Library. Finally, the ongoing re-creation of the exhibits in the lighthouse museum will take a certain amount of work hours to complete. The challenge there is to tell the lighthouse's story from start to finish in a meaningful and attractive way.

One final challenge mentioned by Ann Johnson is the digitizing of the lighthouse's archives. Fragile, old

logbooks and letters cannot last in perpetuity. But digitizing them, that is, preserving images of them in electronic format is costly and time-consuming. Similar concerns from other organizations have been shared with us in the past. For example, the Westerly Library has been actively seeking an effective way to create electronic files of its old newspapers. This effort has been underway for several years but is complicated by funding concerns and time constraints. Likewise, the Special Collections department of the URI Library reports that only ten percent of its scan-ready materials have been archived in digital format. The University of Rhode Island Library must deal with a new group of student volunteers and interns every year, so the retraining of workers cuts into the time that might be spent scanning and indexing.

With a full plate of challenges and opportunities, the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association forges ahead, maintaining and improving the lighthouse, its museum, and the surrounding property. Access to Watch Hill Point is via Lighthouse Road (a private road) is available to pedestrians from 8 AM to sunset throughout the year. Vehicles are permitted only for the handicapped and senior citizens. The Lighthouse itself and its adjacent structures are closed to the public. However, the museum is open on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons from 1-3 PM in July and August and through the week after Labor Day. For further information about the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association, including how to donate, visit their website at <https://www.watchhilllighthousekeepers.org>

FROM THE ARCHIVES

By Zachary J. Garceau

We are pleased to add the following donated items to our archives:

- Set of 6 silver spoons made by Thomas Perry, silversmith, inscribed "P M H" and "M H."
- Set of 10 spoons made by R.W.R. Oath and inscribed "W.I.H.P"

Donated by:

**The grandchildren of
Dr. William Campbell Thompson and
Mrs. Grace (Griffin) Thompson**

George Fenton Crandall-A Mysterious Passing

By Ann L. Smith

Everyone likes a good mystery, especially when it is connected to an old artifact that is discovered with no known information attached to it. As for the Westerly Historical Society, all our former archivists have done an outstanding job in maintaining our holdings. However, our current archivist, Zachary J. Garceau, recently discovered an uncatalogued small item with no ascension record or information of any kind accompanying it.

For members of our executive board, any kind of emails we receive regarding “mystery items” can easily change an ordinary evening into trivia night as we all try to discover the history behind a particular person, place, or thing. Such was the case one evening last spring when we were shown the photographs that appear on this page and the page following. Zack Garceau sent us images of a small medal from the year 1896 with some inscriptions on both front and back Attached to the medal is a small dogtag-type of appendage with the initials GFC.



UNDOCUMENTED ARTIFACT
FROM THE WESTERLY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES
PHOTO: ZACHARY J. GARCEAU

Note that in the image above the word “Championship” appears over the initials, “HC.” At first glance the item appears to be an award for a sports competition or perhaps an academic event, such as might be given for a debate team win. The reverse bears the name of the presenter, “A.L. Castritius,” a well-known jeweler in Westerly at the time.



VIEW OF REVERSE SIDE OF MEDAL
PHOTO: ZACHARY J. GARCEAU

Finally, the initials on the dog-tag sparked a wild notion in this writer’s mind that this item might be the property of one the Crandall family members. Why Crandall and not some other family? Only the fates know. There was, however, a prominent member of Westerly society by the name of George Fenton Crandall who was presented with a silver pin by some locals in 1896, as the records will show. Was this item then Crandall’s pin? The motifs and the inscription of the word “Champion” don’t seem to support the idea. After all, “GFC” could be an abbreviation for “Gun and Field Club,” or the “Girls Forensic Club,” or any one of a thousand things.

As luck would have it, the coincidental awarding of a silver medal to Mr. George Fenton Crandall in 1896 led to the telling of an interesting tale; a tale which is in all likelihood completely unrelated to the mysterious pin shown here. To begin, we found this small newspaper item in the January 25, 1896 edition of the *Newport Mercury*

Mr. G. Fenton Crandall was on Saturday evening presented with a handsome Knight Templar charm, by the stockholders in the schooner *George E. Vernon* who secured their insurance through Mr. Crandall's efforts.

Who, then, was this feted Mr. Crandall who was recognized for his business acumen by his fellow Masons and businessmen? What about the schooner

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George Fenton Crandall

(Continued from Page 5)

referred to in the newspaper item? A quick Internet search revealed that the *George E. Vernon* was launched at Boothbay, Maine on August 5, 1891.

[She] was said to be 176 feet and 566 tons, intended for the South American trade, and owned by George F. Crandall and others of Newport, RI with Peter Armbrust of Jamestown, RI the captain. She was actually 596 gross tons and 165 feet long, according to the 1894 *Merchant Vessels*. "By September she had moved north to Poole's Landing (north of the yard) to load ice for Norfolk, Virginia where she will load coal for Savannah, Georgia."

(A photograph of the *George E. Vernon* can be found by following this link

<http://www.shorpy.com/node/11768>)

Aside from Crandall's investment in the *George E. Vernon* and other boats such as the *Vila y Hermanos*, George Crandall was a major stockholder in the Old Colony Railroad, a large system covering southeastern Massachusetts and parts of Rhode Island. For many years the Old Colony Railroad Company also operated steamboat and ferry lines. (The marriage of shipping and rail lines in the nineteenth century was common and was one of convenience given the geographical limitations facing rail companies at the time.

Consider, for example, that the railroad bridge over the Thames River in Connecticut did not exist prior to 1889. Thus, goods and passengers often reached their destinations via a combination of transportation methods.) Old Colony was acquired by the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad in 1893 but retained the Old Colony name while being carried as a separate division within the NYNH&H.

On Tuesday, September 29, 1896, George Fenton Crandall took a train to Boston in order to attend the annual meeting of the Old Colony Railroad. With the company's agenda fully completed by late afternoon, Mr. Crandall checked into the New Marlboro Hotel at about 6 PM. He then left for a time, presumably to partake of his evening meal, then returned to his hotel. The next morning George Crandall was found dead in his hotel room with the gas jets of the chandelier wide open and still spewing the deadly gas that killed him.

Early newspaper reports declared that Crandall's death was likely a suicide, but later reports theorized that the tragedy was probably the result of an accident

involving Crandall's own negligence. The suicide theory was handily dismissed by a reporter who (serendipitously) claimed to have been seated next to Crandall on his Boston-bound train the day before. A long newspaper account of Crandall's fine circumstances ensued, along with a description of his "contented mind," how "cheerful" he was, and how comfortable he was financially. His clothes were found to be carefully laid out, an indication to some that he fully expected to continue his affairs the following day.

If the suicide theory was essentially debunked, so too was the accidental death argument. With his poor sense of smell, and the idea that it would have been possible for Mr. Crandall to have turned the gas handles too far, (such that they would not have been closed at all,) newspaper editors were quick to point out that Mr. Crandall had frequented the Marlboro hotel many times. He would have been quite familiar with how to turn the gas on and off, they said, and it was unlikely that he erred in putting out the lights the night he died.



"DOG-TAG" APPENDAGE
TO "CHAMPION" PIN SHOWN
ON PREVIOUS PAGE.
NOTE THE INITIALS "G F C."

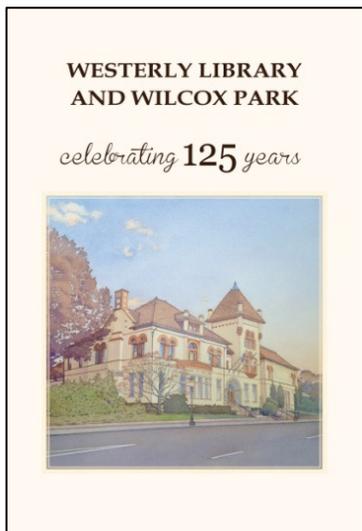
PHOTO: ZACHARY J. GARCEAU

If not an accident or a suicide, only one theory remains of Crandall's death: that he was robbed and murdered. Anyone who reads the various old clippings will spot certain discrepancies in the details of the story. One account says that Crandall retired early; another says that he stayed around the hotel office during the evening. The accidental death theorists stated that Crandall's door was unlocked (an unlikely circumstance for an intended suicide.) Another story says that the door needed to be forced open. One fact was not argued, however. According to Crandall's widow, he left home with a considerable amount of cash in his pocket. A search of his room mysteriously netted the small sum of only sixty one cents. Was the hotel staff involved? The readers can decide.

George Crandall left a widow and two daughters. Although a native of Westerly, he is buried in Island Cemetery in Newport, Rhode Island near where he lived in his later years.

Book Launch Celebrates Westerly Library's History

The Westerly Historical Society is proud to co-sponsor the launch of the Westerly Library's new book, *Westerly Library and Wilcox Park: Celebrating 125 Years*, that tells the full history of both the library and park. By permission of the Westerly Historical Society, the book includes a faithful reprint of Sallie Coy's paper about the library's early years, "Westerly's Living Memorial," which was read before the Westerly Historical Society on April 18, 1963, and published by The Utter Company in 1976.



Please join us at the launch party on **Tuesday, November 20**, at 6:30 PM, in the Hoxie Gallery at Westerly Library. Copies of the book will be available for \$15 each.

WESTERLY'S WITNESS NOW AVAILABLE IN ELECTRONIC FORMAT TO ALL SUBSCRIBERS!

Beginning with the current issue of *Westerly's Witness*, all members who have provided an email address will now be able to access our newsletter in electronic format. If you are currently receiving a paper copy of our newsletter via the U.S. mail, there will be no change to your regular paper mailings of *Westerly's Witness*. If you would rather not be contacted by email notifying you when the newsletter is available on line, you must unsubscribe from all our email notifications by clicking "SafeUnsubscribe" at the bottom of the email. Members may also opt-out **paper** newsletters by contacting our secretary at whssecretary@gmail.com. Whether you prefer electronic, paper, or both, the choice is always yours!



Babcock-Smith House
Holiday Boutique
Saturday, December 8, 2018

9 a.m. ~ 1 p.m.

Join us for a holiday marketplace of cookie platters, custom decorated cookies and other baked goods, handmade decorative greens, artisan-crafted soaps, hearty soups to go and other food items ...

and much, much more!

(Including Joshua's Store and our exceptional Raffle Baskets)

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