



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

April 2019

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Calendar of Events

Sunday, April 28, 2019 2:00 PM
Markham Starr
**"Point Jude:
Portraits From a Fishing Port"**
(Documentary Film)



This documentary film by Markham Starr follows eight people through a typical day as they work both on the water harvesting seafood and on shore in support of the fishing industry. Mr. Starr will speak about the making of the film and take questions at its conclusion.

Program will be Held at the Carriage House
of the Babcock-Smith House Museum
124 Granite Street, Westerly, RI
Free Admission to all Programs
Thanks to the Support of the
**Ocean Community Chamber of Commerce
and the
Westerly 350th Anniversary Committee**

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Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

If you've ever been asked to describe Westerly's downtown to a stranger, chances are you started with the Westerly Library and Wilcox Park. But it seems as if no amount of photos, videos, or prosaic descriptions can ever convey what it feels like to be there in person. When you add the rich history of these places to the fact that they are beautiful to behold, one only comes to love them more.

In these days of rapid change and instant everything it's kind of comforting to have these two timeless gems in the center of our world. As historians, we look at the library and park with warmth and pride knowing that they have served many generations of people in a myriad of ways. Moreover, we are grateful that the history of the Library and Memorial Association (owner of the park and library) has been documented and preserved by those who love (and have loved) her most.

Library director Brigitte Hopkins, Wilcox Park director Alan Peck, Maria Bernier and Robert (Bob) Benson brought the park and library's history to life at their recent presentation, "Westerly Library and Wilcox Park—Celebrating 125 Years." Their new book by the same name has also been recently published. We hope you will enjoy the review of this talk which begins on the following page.

Correction: Last month we ran a story about Zachary Garceau's talk on the history of basketball at Westerly High. We mistakenly wrote that board member Brenda Linton played for Westerly in her youth. While we regret this error, it did inspire Brenda to write a short piece about her participation on her school teams in Maine. See Page 5 for Brenda's story.

This month we were pleased to welcome Stephen Cersosimo to our executive board as a member-at-large. Steve is the owner of Granite Photo and is skilled in the care and presentation of artwork and printed matter. Welcome aboard Steve!

Last month four new chairs were delivered to the local history room of the Westerly Library thanks to a joint gift from the Westerly Historical Society and the Babcock-Smith House. These chairs match the table put in place there last year in memory of Dwight and Anna Brown. A new plaque will note that the table and chairs are a gift of the two organizations.



TABLE AND CHAIRS IN LIBRARY LOCAL HISTORY ROOM (SPECIAL COLLECTIONS) DONATED IN MEMORY OF DWIGHT AND ANNA BROWN.
PHOTO: ANN L. SMITH

As promised, Zachary Garceau's feature, "From the Archives" is back this month with updates following the showing of "Our Story—350 Years," the recent historical exhibit at the Westerly Library. A detail of new acquisitions will appear in our next issue of Westerly's Witness.

We are excited to bring you this month's program entitled, "Point Jude: Portraits From a Fishing Port" presented by Markham Starr (see details on Page 1). The presentation will include the showing of Mr. Starr's documentary by the same name and there will be a question and answer period following the film.

Lastly, don't forget to order tickets for our annual meeting and dinner reception taking place on May 15. Our speaker this year will be Betty-Jo Cugini who will talk about the production of her historical documentaries with a focus on "Dr. Babcock and Dr. Franklin." We will present the *Julia* award for outstanding contribution to the preservation of Westerly's history, and the winner of the Westerly Historical Society and Babcock-Smith House *History Award* will be announced that evening. See Page 6 for ticket ordering information.

Program Review: Westerly Library and Wilcox Park Celebrating 125 Years

By Ann L. Smith

Decades ago, Westerly Library's long-time director Sally Coy, wrote *Westerly's Living Memorial* to document the library's history in commemoration of its seventieth anniversary. Her work was presented before the Westerly Historical Society on April 18, 1963, and was later published by The Utter Company in 1976. By 2016, much had transpired in the fifty or so years since *Westerly's Living Memorial* was published and Maria Bernier, the Friends of Westerly Library and Wilcox Park, director Brigitte Hopkins, and others believed it was an appropriate time to offer the public a fresh look at what the Westerly Library and Wilcox Park are all about. With input from many volunteers, much time and effort was expended over a relatively short span of time. What resulted was a book that contains not only the history of the library and the park, but a tribute to the heroic efforts of the Friends of Westerly Library and Wilcox Park, without whom the library might have ceased to exist.

On March 31, 2019, Maria Bernier, Brigitte Hopkins, Alan Peck and Bob Benson shared the contents of the new book with our program attendees. A series of slides augmented the talk with content not wholly contained in the work. From this a great story unfolded before our eyes.

For those unfamiliar with the Westerly Library, it is owned by the Memorial and Library Association which also owns and operates Wilcox Park. While many towns might boast that their library sits adjacent to a park, few can say that the two operate as one entity. However strange Westerly's marriage of the two places may seem, they sprang up together through a serendipitous course of events. The name "Memorial and Library Association" originates from the fact that the library's organizers sought to establish a Civil War Memorial and Public Library. Many towns had erected Civil War monuments as the nineteenth century wound down, but Westerly native and philanthropist Stephen Wilcox envisioned a "living memorial" that would include a library and a place for community members to gather and recreate. The library was to provide quarters for war veterans, an auditorium, gymnasium, bowling alley, and an exhibition gallery for museum-type displays. Through Wilcox's generous gifts and aggressive fundraising by its incorporators, the Westerly Library opened on August 16, 1894. Sadly, Stephen Wilcox passed

away without ever seeing his dream come to fruition. He died in November of the previous year.

Stephen Wilcox's widow, Harriet Hoxie Wilcox, remained active in community affairs after her husband's death. Much of the acreage adjacent to the library was owned by Rowse Babcock, and later his widow. In 1898, when Mrs. Babcock died, there was much talk among the townspeople that the property should be acquired by the town and used for a public park. In August of that year a special town meeting was held to act on the possibility of acquiring of the Babcock property, but the taxpayers defeated the measure. Shortly thereafter, Harriet Wilcox purchased the Babcock property for \$38,000 and gave it to the Memorial and Library Association on November 19, 1898. "The people shall have a park if they want it," she was quoted as saying.

From that day to this, a thousand fascinating bits of history concerning the Westerly Library and Wilcox Park have been recorded. There are so many notable things to ponder that even scratching the surface of the library's history seems daunting for the space allotted here. Thankfully the book, *Westerly Library and Wilcox Park—Celebrating 125 Years*, is available for purchase for \$15 at the library. Yet, in order to whet our readers' appetites, we want to offer a few small take-aways from the book and presentation by its collaborators to pique one's interest.

The library has seen the addition of three new wings over the years. The existing structure is actually four buildings merged into one. During one of the later renovations, the floors in the connecting passageways were brought to a uniform level.

Not only was there a gymnasium and bowling alley at the library, a locker room and showers were available. After the YMCA was established and grew in popularity, the gymnasium, bowling alley and shower spaces were re-purposed.

Wilcox Park, under the direction of Alan Peck, is a state-of-the-art arboretum. Park employees and volunteers, including a number of Master Gardeners, maintain all the plantings and trees using a scientific approach. Utmost care is taken to maintain the pond, fountain, bandstand, statues, and memorials. The

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

By Zachary J. Garceau, Archivist

History is one of the rare fields where if you walk away from something with more questions than answers, it is usually considered a good thing. This is something the Westerly Historical Society and the Babcock Smith House Museum were able to achieve with our joint exhibit “Our Story--350 Years.” The number of inquiries the Society received over the two months the exhibit was shown at the Westerly Public Library’s Hoxie Gallery was nearly double our usual amount. This was not because we failed to provide visitors with enough information, but because they walked away having learned about a part of our town’s history that they never knew existed and wanted to learn more than we could possibly provide in our exhibit space! In response to the exhibit, we received numerous questions and comments about a wide range of local history topics including those from:

- A girl scout, Mackenzie DePietro, who is making a quilt showing various scenes from Westerly’s 350 year history to earn her Silver Award in the Girl Scouts.
- A patron, David Prigmore, who saw a photo we used of Napatree Point which showed a new angle which he was unfamiliar with.
- Mr. Ed Liguori kindly sat down with me and showed me his collection of historical items relating to Westerly High School athletics.

Perhaps the greatest success of the recent exhibit, however, was that it seemed to redefine the way that visitors thought about and viewed local history. Prior to the exhibit, one of the areas in which our collections seemed a bit lacking was the mid to late 20th century. After visiting the library, many people contacted us asking to donate items which were important to their parents and grandparents during the last one hundred years. Some of these donors were initially surprised that we would be interested in the items they chose to graciously gift to the Society. Upon realizing the importance of their contributions, however, all were happy to have aided in the preservation of local history. As a direct result of the 350th anniversary exhibit, the Westerly Historical Society received:

- A wonderful collection of items from Marianne Holly, which included a yearbook, photographs, newspaper articles, and other ephemera from her basketball career at Westerly High School. Mrs. Holly was also able to find both her Class of 1952 ring from Westerly High School and the gym class uniform she wore in the early 1950’s which included her initials stitched on the pocket.
- Susan Capalbo shared a story with us about how she visited the exhibit and the very first photograph she encountered was of the Bradford team of the Twilight League Baseball who were champions in 1940. As it turned out, one of the player’s featured in the photo was her father, Frank Savageau. After seeing the photo, she remembered that she owned her father’s baseball uniform from that team and decided to donate it to the Society. Her gift was greatly appreciated, and has quickly become one of my personal favorite items in our collection.
- At the opening of the exhibit, David Rathbun donated a fantastic scrapbook belonging to George Benjamin Utter which included a cache of amazing pieces which are unique to our collection including Mr. Utter’s marriage record and documents from his time in local politics.

One of the greatest aspects of history, especially when it comes to familiar places and people, is that there are no boundaries. No one can say something is or is not historical. In the end, what matters the most is that the memories we have and the memories those who came before us are preserved for future generations. Whether something happened yesterday or 350 years ago, it is important that we find ways to keep the things which matter to us, the people of Westerly, for those who will come after us.



Playing Girls' Basketball in Maine

By Brenda Linton

Before 1961-62, my basketball experiences were limited to watching the televised Boston Celtics with my dad and then annoying my brothers as they played on the second floor of our barn. They had a half court area with a basket affixed on wooden backboard and successful shots had to be made by clearing the roof rafters.

When girls' high school basketball team tryouts were announced, I, as a freshman, ignored them. The coach called my parents to encourage me to play.

Because I was nearly six feet tall, he assumed that I was basketball savvy. However, I couldn't dribble, pass, run or jump. I made the junior varsity team, as a forward, and in one of my first games, I was high scorer; we lost 89-3. I moved to the varsity the next year.

The rules were very different from today. Teams consisted of six players, three on defense and three on offense. No one could cross the center line unless there was a foul shot involved. Only one dribble and two steps were allowed. Within two years, rovers were introduced. They were two players from each team who could run full court playing both defense and offense. It was four against four with three dribbles allowed.

I didn't play again on an organized team until 1968 when I was a junior in college. By then, the girls were running full court playing five on five with unlimited dribbling. Our record was 8 and 5 and practices were held when the men weren't using the gym.

In 2018, we were invited back to the University of Maine at Gorham to be honored for playing on the school's first varsity women's basketball team. It was especially rewarding as we had a women's team, equal to the men's, four years before Title IX (1972) was enacted.

A special thank you to Zachery Garceau, archivist for the Westerly Historical Society, for giving his program "Blue and White: The History of Basketball at Westerly High School." His talk helped me understand that my basketball playing time was quite unique.

Westerly Library and Wilcox Park

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fountain and main walkway are aligned with the front entrance of the town hall. The next time you are at the fountain in the park, turn and face the town hall. There is a perfect line of sight that connects the center of two places.

The library architects, Longstaff and Hurd, were recommended by Stephen Wilcox after he admired another building of theirs at Bridgeport, Connecticut. While we do know that Wilcox hosted a boat tour to Bridgeport with prospective benefactors to see a Longstaff and Hurd building, it is not known which building they visited. The P. T. Barnum Museum is representative of Longstaff and Hurd's work, and one can see the same style reflected there.



BARNUM MUSEUM - PHOTO: CAPITALGAZETTE.COM

We are grateful to Westerly Library director Brigitte Hopkins, Wilcox Park director Alan Peck, Maria Bernier and Robert (Bob) Benson for sharing the history of the Memorial and Library Association with us. We would also like to thank all of our attendees who filled the room once again to hear this informative program. Those attending the talk received a special five-dollar discount towards the purchase of library's anniversary book and our guests snatched up a total of twenty-nine copies!

The book itself is well worth the price. It contains a "hall of fame" of sorts where each president and director are honored. A detailed index reflects the names of all who are mentioned within the volume--readers will be inspired to see many of our familiars mentioned there. Period photographs enrich the narrative and, once digested, readers will see the library and park in a new light each time they visit from now on.

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 15, 2019 @ \$29.00 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 _____

Cocktails at 5:30 PM (Cash Bar)
Dinner will be served at 6:00 PM

Send this form with your check or money
order before May 8th to:

Westerly Historical Society
PO Box 91
Westerly, RI 02891

**Internet orders may be placed on our
website at**

<http://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/annual-meeting>

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