



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

September 2019

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Calendar of Events

September 29, 2019 2:00 P.M.

Zachary J. Garceau

125 Years of Football at Westerly High School: A History of the Bulldogs, 1893-2018

This presentation will be a discussion of the history of football at Westerly High School, from humble beginnings in the late 19th century to multiple championships throughout the 20th century.

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October 27, 2019 2:00 P.M.

Stephen Cersosimo

Scanning and Digitization of Historic Photos and Other Media

Stephen Cersosimo, owner of Granite Photo in Westerly, will give a talk on the scanning and preservation of photos and other media. The second half of this event will focus on the technologies used for scanning. We invite the audience to bring old photos, negatives, and slides of Westerly and Westerly life for scanning.

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Programs 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
&**

Westerly 350th Anniversary Committee

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PHOTO: PINTEREST.COM

Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

In the summer of 2001 I was reading *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo. A hefty tome, it kept me occupied for the better part of six weeks. To this day it remains my most memorable literary experience. A few years later, Westerly High School presented a stellar production of the play by the same name. Warming my seat with eager anticipation, I waited for the first strains of the overture to begin. Never having had the chance to see the play on Broadway or anywhere else, I was amazed at the passion with which the songs were arranged and presented. (A nod is in order to the late David "Mr. D." DeAngelis for bringing out the best in his student performers.)

What I did not know, but should have, is that plays and movies based on works of literature cannot substitute for the book. While in high school my classmates and I would often rent and watch the movie version of the works we were assigned to read—a helpful tool, perhaps, in getting the plot right and it may have even helped one fake their way through the test if they had not yet finished the book. In the final analysis, though, much of what literature does for us is lost if we skip the written word and go straight to the theatrical or cinematic versions.

Consider that Victor Hugo spent seven years in writing *Les Misérables*. His account of Napoleon at Waterloo goes on for no less than fifty-five pages. A good translation (I chose the 1928 Random House version edited by none other than Bennet Cerf) allows the reader to feel some of the nuances of language peculiar to, or characteristic of, the French way of speaking. Having lived in France for a time (and although no longer fluent in the language) I could almost "hear" the French as I read through this 1920s presentation in English. The historical setting, the intrigue and ironies, the underlying essay on justice—all these are what makes *Les Mis* the timeless classic that it is.

In 2004 Ron Chernow completed his 818-page biography of Alexander Hamilton. The stage play, *Hamilton*, opened in New York City in 2015 and won eleven Tony Awards the following year. This year, Rhode Islanders were thrilled to attend a local production of *Hamilton* during July and August at the Providence Performing Arts Center. While the play's promotional material gives due credit to the Chernow biography, as with *Les Misérables*, the stage play is

meant more to be an entertainment of song and dance than as a substitute for the written work. A positive side effect of *Hamilton*'s success is that the Chernow biography enjoyed a significant spike in sales following the play's production. As of this writing *Hamilton* by Chernow is a top 500 book on Amazon.com and is ranked 129 among biographies sold through Amazon.

I purchased a fine used copy of *Hamilton* and pored over it this summer. In addition to the well-known facts of Hamilton's life, Chernow paints a detailed portrait of the man. The reader gets a glimpse into his moods, his mannerisms, his attire, his style of writing, and even the yearnings of his heart. Hamilton's many struggles began in his early life almost from the time he was born. Determined, astute, and resolute, he was passionate about everything he did.

This month I have written a short piece about how Hamilton struggled to accomplish ratification of the U.S. Constitution. As for Rhode Island's part, the fiercely independent and sometimes headstrong leadership of the smallest state presented a stumbling block for Hamilton's agenda on more than one occasion. We hope you will enjoy "Reflections on Chernow's *Hamilton* and 'Rogue' Island's Role" which begins on the next page.

Our other feature this month is an in-depth interview with our newest member of Westerly Historical Society's executive Board, Stephen Cersosimo. See Page 4 for "The Mayor of Granite Street" to read about Stephen's life experiences over the three decades he has spent as the owner of Granite Photo here in Westerly.

Westerly's 350th Anniversary event, "There's Nothing Trivial About Westerly" has been postponed until September 20. Our executive board has purchased a table and has designs winning the top prize. We will publish a brief recap in next month's *Westerly's Witness*.

Lastly, our program schedule is in full swing beginning with our September lecture by our archivist, Zachary J. Garceau – "125 Years of Football at Westerly High School: A History of the Bulldogs, 1893-2018." Please see Page 1 for the full calendar events for this fall. In addition, the Babcock-Smith House will present "The Post Office Mural Story" on September 15 at 2:00 P.M. Visit <http://www.babcocksmithhouse.org> for details.

Reflections on Chernow's *Hamilton* and "Rogue" Island's Role

By Ann L. Smith

The nickname "Rogue's Island" probably goes back to the 1600's when John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, spoke of Roger Williams and his fellow champions of free religious expression. After Williams, many occurrences exemplifying of Rhode Island's fierce independent nature have been recorded. From the oft-quoted *The Town That Saved a State: Westerly* by Mary Agnes Best, we see how Rhode Island refused to capitulate to numerous edicts and fabricated "charter revisions," all claiming that our state was part of either Connecticut or Massachusetts. Rhode Island was the first to declare independence from England, having done so on May 4, 1776—a full sixty days before the United States issued its Declaration of Independence on July 4 of that same year. Rhode Island also was the last of the thirteen colonies to ratify the United States Constitution, finally accepting on May 29, 1790.

Rhode Island's journey from independent colony to the thirteenth state reveals an interesting story and one that, perhaps, has not received the attention it deserves. Probably the most inspiring account of our nation's birth, and Rhode Island's small but critical role in it, is the colossal, 818-page Alexander Hamilton biography by award-winning author, Ron Chernow. Chernow's work was the inspiration for Lin-Manuel Miranda's smash musical play, *Hamilton* which premiered in 2015. Even though Chernow somehow ignores Rhode Island's early declaration of independence in discussing July, 1776 by writing, "No colony had ever succeeded in breaking away from the mother country to set up a self-governing state..." the details of our nation's path to independence are absorbing to say the least.

Following the protracted work of the Constitutional Convention (which Rhode Island boycotted) each state was tasked with convening individual ratifying conventions. These ratifying conventions were to be independent from their states' legislatures and this formula was supposedly done for "tactical and philosophical reasons." What the author Chernow explains regarding this is the founders' vision to have the Constitution derive its legitimacy "not from the statehouses but directly from the citizenry, enabling federal law to supersede state legislation."

Rhode Island boycotted the Constitutional Convention because they were afraid it would afford too much power to the national government. There were other holdouts besides Rhode Island (New Hampshire, Virginia and North Carolina) but Rhode Island was the only colony to boycott the Constitutional Convention.

Hamilton, for his part, had risen to a position of prominence both at the Constitutional Convention and within the ranks of his own state's ratifying convention in New York. The states' ratifying conventions were scheduled in a particular order (with heavy input from Hamilton) so as to create a bandwagon effect. Under federal law in effect to this day, three-fourths of the states must ratify constitutional laws for them to be valid. For the colonies, the golden number was nine in order to form a union. After eight ratifications had passed, New York, at number nine, was to be the first of the "tough sales," and Hamilton appeared at center stage during the struggle. An extraordinary orator and an exceptional logician, Alexander Hamilton was no stranger to delivering arguments that, at times, lasted for six hours. Still, New York and the rest of the holdouts; New Hampshire, Virginia, North Carolina and Rhode Island would present formidable challenges. The old "Rogue's Island" would soon emerge as "Rogue" Island.

The issues for New York were many and somewhat complicated. Manufacturing and agrarian interests were at odds. At issue too was the assumption by the federal government of the states' war debts. The establishment of a more centrally located federal capital was another cause for debate. Amidst all the issues, New York was staunchly refusing to ratify before Virginia. As Hamilton was arguing for his Federalist causes before New York's ratifying convention, word came from New Hampshire that they had accepted the Constitution on June 21, 1788. Virginia ratified five days later with the understanding that a bill of rights would be added. When word of Virginia's ratification reached New York, they too demanded the addition of a bill of rights but refused to ratify on good faith as had Virginia. Hamilton argued that the ratifying convention had no authority to make changes.

The issue finally moved beyond its deadlocked state when Melancton Smith promised to endorse the Constitution on the faith that Congress would consider

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Stephen Cersosimo: The Mayor of Granite Street

By Ann L. Smith

Local businessman Stephen Cersosimo was accepted to the Westerly Historical Society's executive board earlier this year. Stephen brings a wealth of talent to the board due to his expertise in photo processing, restoration, and preservation. He recently agreed to an in-depth interview with our newsletter editor.

Q. What made you decide to volunteer for the Westerly Historical Society's executive board?

I have been friends with President Tom Gulluscio for many years. When he told me there was an opening on the board I thought it would be the perfect thing to volunteer for. I have been working preserving, scanning, framing, and restoring old photos for over 30 years. I also knew many other fine people on the board and knew it would be a pleasure working with them.

Q. Is there something specific or some era in particular about our local history that is particularly close to your heart?

There is no specific era I am interested in. I am interested in all phases, times anything from the past.

Q. Your business, Granite Photo, has been located on Granite Street for decades. Tell us about the changes you have seen along Granite Street over the years. What things do you miss? Which improvements have you welcomed?

My interest in photography started many years ago when I was vacationing in Hawaii in 1983. Ever since then I have been taking pictures. My dad knew of my interest and he saw a great opportunity in offering film developing in our store, Granite Photo, so he purchased the first one hour lab in Rhode Island. From there I developed the business to include custom framing and event photography.

I do really miss film. I think the quality of film still hasn't been duplicated with digital cameras. Phones have really diluted quality photos as well, since everyone has an app to manipulate and change your image. This has made people sometimes accept photos that are just OK rather than using a camera and taking their time to make a fabulous photo. With the advancement of computers and the capabilities of new programs I found I was able to scan and restore old photos and slides.

Q. Do you have any favorite memories of the Granite Street neighborhood from the last century?

I have some great memories of Granite Photo: working Christmas time and the place would be full of customers and I knew most of their names; watching families grow up as they brought their photos to be developed; the camaraderie of all the employees working together to provide great service for our customers every day. You knew all the store owners in the plaza and everyone greeted each other by name.

Q. Is there a memorable character in your past among your employees, customers, or business neighbors? Can you tell us a little about them?

Louis Laudone was the manager. I worked with him every day. He was always fun to work with. Linda Dessaulès—I remember she would complain about customers giving her a hard time because she was female—so I sat beside her in the customer service area where I couldn't be seen and saw this for myself. We would laugh like crazy just being silly. There were so many good people and great experiences, and I grew up working there.

Q. What would you like our readers to know about the importance of historic preservation in terms of printed matter, especially photographs?

Preserving history is extremely important. It's where we came from and our ancestors made this country what it is today. Keeping this knowledge—the photos and artifacts from past years—shows our young people how people lived and builds an appreciation for how far we have come. Without these things we lose sight of the world and our values.

Q. How did your business navigate the changes that took place when photo processing went digital?

As the world of photography has changed I have always tried to keep up with that change. I was the first local business to offer printing from digital images. I have always upgraded my equipment and knowledge to keep up with the changes technology has brought us. These changes and upgrades have been important to me as they have kept my job changing and kept me moving forward for my customers.

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Stephen Cersosimo

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Q. If folks are interested in the scanning or restoration services that Granite Photo offers, what can they expect when they visit your shop?

When coming to have something scanned at my shop you are getting years of experience behind the computer. I know what resolutions are needed for the job. I can color-correct those photos and even restore them if you wish. I have scanned many old documents and restored many old photos. I just finished a job for a client who came up from Florida. I scanned a whole collection of old money, requisitions for beef to feed the troops from the revolutionary war, and many signed documents from 1776, 1777, and 1778. I organized and archived them for a museum in Washington DC.

Q. Is photo scanning or restoration expensive?

Scanning is not very expensive as a whole. It all depends on the resolution you want, the condition of the item and size. Restorations are gauged by the same parameters and must be scanned first so they can be restored.

Q. When we talk about our vision for the future of the Westerly Historical Society, what ideas will you bring to the table?

I would like to help Zachary Garceau archive our collection whether it's by scanning or storage. With my experience I can make sure all the proper products were used in framing to make sure they are preserved properly. I am sure we will be spending a lot of time together and I am here to help in any way the board would like.

Stephen's store, Granite Photo, is in the Granite Street shopping center, 116F Granite Street, Westerly. He lives in Charlestown next to his ice cream shop, Tropic Frost, with his two sons, Stephen, 19 and Scott, 20. Stephen serves as treasurer of the Cross Mills Volunteer Fire Department. He is also the vice president and a past-president of the Washington County Fire Police. Stephen was the executive vice president and conservation chairman for RI Mobile Sportfishermen (RIMS) where he organized many beach clean-ups and facilitated an Eagle Scout project. Stephen can be reached at granitephoto1@gmail.com or by calling (401) 348-8166.

Chernow's *Hamilton*; "Rogue" Island's Role

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certain amendments. At last on July 26 had enough minds been changed to win ratification by New York. The question passed by a vote of 30 to 27. New York City meanwhile celebrated in grand fashion holding an all-day parade with floats, banners, and all manner of displays lionizing the now champion of commerce and the altogether famous Alexander Hamilton.

In North Carolina the issue of adding a bill of rights was in line with the objections of New York, Virginia, and Rhode Island. Hamilton, in perhaps the worst misstep of his political career, failed to see the importance of a declaration, or "bill" of rights. His reasoning was that no one was hindering anyone's freedoms and he blindly failed to understand the need for codification of their protection. In Hamilton's *Federalist* essay #84 he wrote, "For why declare that things shall not be done for which there is no power to do?" In other words, Hamilton seemed to have faith that our basic freedoms would universally be abided by and never threatened, thus eliminating the need to protect them under the law. North Carolina finally ratified the Constitution on November 21, 1789.

History credits James Madison with authoring the Bill of Rights and it is widely accepted that he based them on the writings of George Mason, the "father of the Bill of Rights" who drafted the Virginia state constitution in 1776. But Rhode Island can claim its share of notoriety with regard to the first ten amendments to our Constitution. More than fifteen years before ratifying the United States Constitution, a group of Rhode Island freemen met at the Westerly home of Edward Bliven on February 2, 1774. The meeting was the largest ever held up to that time in the town of Westerly, and was chaired by Samuel Ward, the governor of the colony.

The fifteen resolutions drafted on that February evening became the basis for Rhode Island's Declaration of Independence in May of 1776. Much of Rhode Island's Declaration was copied into the United States Declaration of Independence which was signed two months later. Certainly protests against the British crown topped the list, but a reiteration of natural rights, especially freedom of religion, is contained throughout the document.

The purpose of the Westerly resolutions was to ignite

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The Westerly Historical Society
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Chernow's *Hamilton*; "Rogue" Island's Role

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public interest in an independent government free of the tyranny imposed on them by Britain's abuses. A committee was formed—counted among them were Joshua and James Babcock—whose duty it would be to correspond with the committees of the other towns in Rhode Island in order to form a system of government that would insure the natural rights of her people. It was voted that night to publish the proceedings of the meeting, including the fifteen resolutions, in the *Newport Mercury*. (The detailed account of the Freemen's meeting including their resolutions can be found in Denison's *Westerly and Its Witnesses* beginning at page 110.)

In the final analysis, it could be argued that if not for the forward-thinking patriots of Westerly, our founding principles might not have included all that they do today. Our town fathers' tenacious quest for freedom and the preservation of natural rights seems to have contributed not only to the letter of the United States' laws, but to the spirit that drove their adoption.

As for Hamilton, his passion for righteousness

sometimes outweighed his sense of reason. Years after the adoption of the Bill of Rights, Hamilton appeared at the door of Rhode Island Governor Arthur Fenner in 1800. Having had a falling out with President John Adams, Hamilton had been travelling around New England attempting to garner support for Charles Pinckney in the pending presidential election. Hamilton's confidants' attempts to dissuade him fell on deaf ears. Biographer Chernow writes, "Impervious to criticism, Hamilton had embarked on a mad escapade to elect Pinkney, and it was bootless for friends to warn him that he had started a dangerous vendetta." Fenner dismissed Hamilton and his pompous retinue of colonels and generals with all the grace that one might afford an unwanted proselyte showing up unannounced at the door.

Of course, Pinkney lost in 1800. Jefferson was elected President and Aaron Burr won the Vice-Presidency. And while Hamilton's story is well known, including his infamous assassination by Burr, the Chernow biography is still worth the time it takes to read it.