



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

November-December 2020

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Calendar of Events

Visit the Babcock-Smith House During the Holiday Season

The volunteers of the Babcock-Smith House Museum and Westerly Historical Society would like to welcome you to the museum during the holiday season. The 1734 mansion house and grounds will be decorated for Christmas, Joshua's Store will be open, and guided museum house visits will be provided at no charge.

To be fully compliant with COVID-19 regulations, visits will be by reservation only for groups of five persons or fewer, and masks are required. Museum visits will be available on Thursday and Friday evenings between 6 PM and 8 PM, and Saturday afternoons from 2 PM to 4 PM. Visits begin on Thursday, December 3rd with the final visits offered on Saturday, December 19th.

To reserve a guided house visit please call the Babcock-Smith House Museum at 401-596-5704.

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1891 MAP OF MONEY HILL IN WATCH HILL
MADE BY THE ORDER OF
LYNEAS NORTON AND WALTER ST. JOHN JONES



BABCOCK-SMITH HOUSE

Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

If you've ever browsed through the pages of *Watch Hill Through Time* (Barnes, 2005) you would probably agree that this massive collection of Watch Hill photos and history is in a class by itself. Although it has the appearance of a coffee-table book, this magnificent work is more like an encyclopedia than any light read of the coffee-table genre. Because of the personal stories and minute detail it contains, *Watch Hill Through Time* surpasses even the best encyclopedia entries on the subject.

Even though every part of *Watch Hill Through Time* is an unmatched jewel, the sections on the cottage colony and the "cottagers" is particularly informative, and for this author, engrossing. Each time we turn our attention to the history of Watch Hill, it seems that the Barnes book is our first point of reference. It should be no surprise then, when an online commenter recalled their childhood days at "Treasure Island" in Watch Hill, that I looked in *Watch Hill Through Time* to learn more.

What one person remembered as "Treasure Island" is actually a place known as *Treasure Hill*, and its story is interesting for several reasons. This month's feature article, "The History of *Treasure Hill*," (see Page 3) recounts some interesting facts about the property's original owner, Henry B. Joy and the terrible fire that destroyed the first *Treasure Hill* in 1976. The story of the rebuild and its succession of owners brings the reader of this article up to the present day.

One sidebar about this story is that I embarked on a search for the writings of William B. Fiske, whom Barnes quotes several times in *Watch Hill Through Time*. Thinking myself to be out of the loop; perhaps the only person around these parts that never heard of William B. Fiske, I decided to find out more about him. Fiske, it turns out, was born in 1916 and summered in Watch Hill from the time he was a child. His privately-published memoir, *A Curious Childhood*, contains writings that are not only eloquent, but rare and valuable. With only 100 copies ever printed, it is astonishing that a few copies of *A Curious Childhood* can still be had on the used book market. What makes Fiske's memoir uncommon is that it contains first-hand accounts of events that took place nearly one hundred years ago. Published in 1975, the author effortlessly recalls his favorite times

in Watch Hill. He does it with such detail that the only other first-hand accounts of this time and place that would be more valuable are personal diaries or journals of others from that era.

As a small treat, I will offer this short excerpt from *A Curious Childhood* (pp. 51-52) that is unrelated to this month's article. Here William Fiske recalls his visits to the Japanese Shop in the Larkin Block.

Once inside, the exotic, utterly delightful, and pungently sweet scent of incense, burning in little candle-heated, brass cups, was overwhelming. But the eye, even more than the nose, was entranced. There before me was a heterogeneous assemblage of every conceivable trifle that might captivate the childish heart. Tiny packets of tightly curled papers which, when one of them, like a pill, was dropped in a glass of water, magically unfurled to display a multi-colored bouquet; and there were those enchantingly painted wooden, Japanese doll figures, carved to nest one within another in an astonishingly numerous succession of grotesquely porcine and enigmatically inscrutable Buddhas...[There were] tiny gold and red paper packets . . . of miniature fire crackers strung together with thread...glass glycerine-filled globes containing tiny temples...rice paper lanterns...with clusters of painted glass bangles melodiously tinkling and chiming together...Oh, no Aladdin's cave or captive genie could possibly produce delights to rival this endlessly intriguing storehouse of treasure trove and Arabian nights' delight.



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. A membership renewal form appears on Page 6 of this issue. If you prefer, 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.

The History of Treasure Hill

By Ann L. Smith

There is an 1891 map of “Everett Farm” in Watch Hill that shows a small rise overlooking what we now refer to as East Beach (see illustration on Page 1 of this issue.) Written across this section are the words, “Money Hill, F. J. Jones.” The story of *Treasure Hill* begins with this yellowed map and the steep piece of land whose only level section was a large salt marsh or pond. F. J. Jones (Frank) was a Cincinnati attorney who purchased the Money Hill section of Watch Hill from Charles Everett of Tenafly, NJ. Together with his wife Frances, Jones held the property until 1902 when it was sold to Thomas Thacher. Thacher sold the parcel to Henry B. Joy in 1916 for “ten dollars and other valuable considerations.”

The Money Hill land stayed undeveloped until after the end of World War I. Henry Joy, who was president and then chairman of Packard Motor Company, left his position on the board to join The Army Signal Corps and support the war effort. Joy, having served in the U.S. Navy during the Spanish-American War, entered the Army as a captain and ended his second military stint as a lieutenant colonel. He then resumed his position at Packard and laid the plans for his summer home in Rhode Island. In *Watch Hill Through Time*, Barnes writes that the Joy home at Money Hill was constructed between 1920 and 1921. The stone wall that lines the driveway bears a marker near the street that reads “1923.”

Locals claim that it was Henry Joy’s intention to construct the entire home from the same Westerly granite from which the driveway wall was made. Whether Joy was impatient or feared the idea that he would not live long enough to see the completion of his home, only the foundation was built from stone. The rest of the siding was wood. In keeping with the local custom of naming one’s “cottage,” Joy’s new home would be christened not as Money Hill, but *Treasure Hill*.

Henry Joy was one of several a well-known captains of business and industry who summered in Watch Hill. William A. Proctor of Proctor & Gamble and Christian Lihme, founder of Lihme Zinc Company, as examples, were but two of the Joys’ well-to-do neighborhood contemporaries. The Bai Lihme family owned *Norman Hall*, probably the largest estate in Watch Hill in the 1920s and is among the largest if not the largest to this day.



EARLY PHOTO OF *TREASURE HILL*
PHOTO COURTESY OF ANTHONY AND DYANA FONDA

So by 1923 the Henry B. Joy family had taken their rightful place among the Cincinnati elites who founded the cottage colony of Watch Hill. The area hotels continued to fill up each season with tourists from everywhere, and eventually Ohioans were not the only people owning personal real estate at Watch Hill. William Fiske, a boy from upscale Madison, New Jersey, summered in Watch Hill with his grandmother in the early days of *Treasure Hill*. Imagine the wonderment felt by a small boy, even though he was himself from a family of means, as he gazed at the shiny Packards lined up at Joy’s stately home. In Fiske’s memoir, *A Curious Childhood* (1975) he recalls

The Joys’ fleet of Packard cars were a delight. They were all new every year, and never less than three at a time were always drawn up before their cottage, a different sequence of cars appearing almost daily, and it was a never-to-be-solved puzzle just how many there would be should a full assemblage of all occur at one time. They were of particular interest to me because...they were painted as a matching fleet...of the deepest maroon with black fenders and had brilliantly polished headlights, radiators, and radiator ornaments, and wheel discs, all of brass rather than of nickel. Whether this stationary parade, as it could be called, arose from some practical necessity or from a mistaken desire for ostentation, never crossed my mind. It did not matter. It was simply there as an endless source of interest.

As for the names, “Money Hill” and “Treasure Hill,”

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The History of Treasure Hill

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no one really knows how the names evolved. There is a legend that says the pirate Captain Kidd may have buried some treasure there, although none has ever been found. Captain Kidd journeyed from the Caribbean to New York on a sloop and continued to Boston by sea where he and his wife were arrested in 1699 for Kidd's acts of piracy. Having learned en route to New York that he was wanted, Kidd supposedly buried treasure in several places along the coast between New York and Boston. Gardiner's Island, which lies between Long Island's two forks, is one such legendary place. The naming of the road on which *Treasure Hill* sits as "Kidd's Way" was no doubt a means of perpetuating the Kidd legend.



ILLUSTRATOR AND AUTHOR HOWARD PYLE DEPICTED CAPTAIN KIDD BURYING SOME OF HIS TREASURE IN HOWARD PYLE'S *BOOK OF PIRATES* (PUBLISHED POSTHUMOUSLY IN 1921).

Henry Joy retired from Packard in 1926. He remained active in the Lincoln Highway Association (founded 1913) of which he was the first president. The LHA's mission was to build the first interstate highway and name it as a tribute to Abraham Lincoln. Henry Joy died in 1936, two years before the road's completion, but a monument honoring his commitment to the project was ordered from Smith Granite Company of Westerly in 1938. This monument was placed along the Lincoln Highway in Wyoming's Great Divide Basin, a favorite camping spot of Henry Joy, and a place where he had asked to be buried, but never was. Joy's monument was later moved to a highway rest area near Laramie, Wyoming in 2001 to protect it from vandals.

Just before Henry Joy's death, he formed the Treasure Hill Land Company to which he granted several Watch Hill parcels, including his home on Kidd's Way. After Joy's death, his son Henry B. Joy, Jr. ran the company with others until about 1960. At that time the company deeded the house at 2 Kidd's Way to Helen Joy Lee, sister of Henry Joy Jr. for the token price of one dollar.

In 1964 Helen Joy Lee sold Treasure Hill to Christ Church of Westerly. The church used the property as a retreat for its Rhode Island clergy and other religious (i.e., deacons, nuns). Christ Church vacated the property in 1968 at which time it was acquired by the Fonda family of Connecticut.

The next twelve years marked a period of quiet enjoyment for the Fondas at *Treasure Hill*. That is, until the horrific fire which tore through the structure on Memorial Day weekend in 1976. Anthony Fonda, who now lives on an adjacent property, reviewed the original news reports of the fire with us and remarked, "It seems like yesterday." The Fondas were out with houseguests at Stonington, Connecticut when the fire broke out. The Watch Hill Fire Department was assisted by fire companies from Miquamicut, Dunn's Corners and Westerly. The Fire Marshall's office determined that the fire was started by an electrical short in the wiring system in the roof. More specifically, according to Mr. Fonda, a screw used in the aluminum wiring had worked itself loose enough to cause a short.



TREASURE HILL FOLLOWING 1976 FIRE
PHOTO BY JEAN PELLEGRINO FOR SEASIDE TOPICS

According to *The Westerly Sun*, the home sustained extensive smoke and water damage. Tar, melted from between the ceilings, had run down below and caused additional heavy damage. Some personal belongings and valuables were salvaged and the decision was made to demolish *Treasure Hill* and rebuild it.

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The History of Treasure Hill

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The construction of the new *Treasure Hill* was not immediately begun following the fire, however. The Fondas retreated to Connecticut for a time and continued to work while leaving the *Treasure Hill* rebuild project on their back burner. By 1988, however, the Fonda's new cottage welcomed them back sitting atop old Money Hill, just where the first *Treasure Hill* had stood. But there were still more plans in the works for this historic location.

Because the original *Treasure Hill* plot was rather large, and the wetlands had been reduced over time by what Barnes referred to as the "ubiquitous phragmites," a second home was planned and permitted on the north side of *Treasure Hill*. The Fondas were able to carve out a second lot on the property and built a second home that now faces Aloha Drive. And even though *Treasure Hill* was rebuilt, the name was not abandoned.

The Fondas sold *Treasure Hill* in the early 2000s and moved into the slightly newer home next door. *Treasure Hill* changed hands again in 2007 and is now owned by a family from Simsbury, Connecticut. Since the rebuild, *Treasure Hill* has had its stucco exterior replaced with a pale siding (shown below), and the current owners have replaced that siding natural wooden shingles.



THE REBUILT *TREASURE HILL*

PHOTO FROM CTMLS.COM. DOWNLOADED FROM REDFIN.COM

From an architectural standpoint, The new *Treasure Hill* seems to have incorporated the feel of the original home that Henry Joy built. In particular, the roofline seems similar, and the three stories still provide sweeping views of the Atlantic Ocean as before. The home has seven bedrooms and eight-and-a-half baths. The stone garage and foundation recall the original motif of the first *Treasure Hill*. Even though no buried treasure was discovered during the excavation for the rebuild, the home remains a true treasure for all those who have had the pleasure of living there.

AUTHOR OF UPCOMING RAILROAD BOOK SEEKS INPUT FROM LOCALS

Westerly Historical Society member and previous winner of the annual History Award, Alex Berardo, is writing a book on the history of railroads in Westerly and the importance of the Westerly train station to the community. He is looking for personal stories from area people which will appear in the book's epilogue. Alex would appreciate it if anyone with any railroad-related memories or old photos would contact him at westerlyrailroadbook@gmail.com or by phone at 401-489-1250.

Both ordinary and extraordinary memories are welcome, but the more specific the better. Examples could include:

- A memorable time you took the train from town or met someone arriving at Westerly
- Something you like or remember about the train station building
- What things used to be like around the station when you were younger
- Any memories or stories about freight service or trolleys in Westerly
- Thoughts about other railroad buildings such as the freight house (now Agway) or the interlocking tower (off High Street)
- Any railroad workers you remember

WESTERLY'S WITNESS **PAPERLESS OPTION AVAILABLE**

All members who have provided an email address receive notification emails as each new edition of *Westerly's Witness* is posted online. If you are currently receiving a paper copy of our newsletter via the U.S. mail in addition the online version, there will be no change to your regular paper mailings unless you request it. If you would like to go "paperless," simply contact the editor at whstreasurer@gmail.com.

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



It's Time to Renew!

Westerly Historical Society Membership Renewal Form

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual | \$20.00 | <input type="checkbox"/> Patron | \$100.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family | \$30.00 | <input type="checkbox"/> Benefactor | \$250.00+ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining | \$50.00 | | |

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Thank you for your continued support!