



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

January-February 2021

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Calendar of Events

Our Events Have Gone Virtual!

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Programs from the Westerly Historical Society are free and currently available online. Our topic for January 2021 is "Connecticut Dairy Farms," featuring a film by Markham Starr. We are looking forward to bringing you a new program each month. We have an awesome lineup for this winter and spring. Look for new program postings during the first week of each month. Stay tuned and enjoy



this month's program!

To view January's program, *Life of a Dairyman* by Markham Starr,

go to our events page at <https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/events/> Then under "January 2021" simply click on the words [\[Link to January program\]](#). This documentary contains an in-depth interview with Clark Woodmansee III of Preston, Connecticut, one of a dwindling number of dairy farmers in our area. Viewers will gain insight into the history of dairy farming in our region and understand the challenges faced by dairy farmers in current times.

Please check the events page on our website in early February to access another new program. To view videos of previous programs please visit our events archive page at <https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/events-archive/>

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Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

In our last issue I wrote about the self-published memoir of William Fiske who summered in Watch Hill as a boy in the 1920s. The book, *A Curious Childhood*, was a quick read, but fascinating in every respect. In this issue of *Westerly's Witness*, I wanted to take one last look at this unique autobiography. Part of my reason for doing so is because of the places mentioned in the book, and partly to delve into Fiske's ancestry, which includes Captain Nathaniel Palmer IV, Fiske's great uncle on his mother's side.

Nathaniel Palmer, was a seal hunter from Stonington, Connecticut. In 1820 at the age of twenty-one, he and his crew sailed the small sloop *Hero* to what is today known as the Antarctic Peninsula. They are said to be the first Americans to explore this part of Antarctica. Captain Palmer conducted many successful voyages throughout the globe during his career for the transportation of express freight. In his quest for ways to make sailing vessels more efficient, he designed certain technological improvements for the ships of his time. He is known as a co-developer of the mid-nineteenth century clipper ship.

Captain Palmer built his home in Stonington Connecticut between 1852 and 1854. Today it is known as the Captain Nathaniel B. Palmer House and is home to the Stonington Historical Society. As anyone might imagine, claiming a famous person such as Nathaniel Palmer as an ancestor brings with it a certain amount of clout.

For William Fiske, at least during his childhood, his quasi-prestigious lineage seemed to be of little concern. His grandmother seemed to take pride in being a Palmer, even though she admonished William about boasting. But the fact that she was a wealthy widow was a result of her having married well. Grandmother Palmer had married William Slark Letchford, heir to the Letchford family's successful dry-goods import and wholesale business.

In the book, *A Curious Childhood*, William Fiske laments the fact that his grandfather died while Fiske was still an infant. Fiske claims that his grandfather never worked a "day in his life," but U.S. Census records show that William Letchford was clerking for his father in 1880, the same year he married Sarah Palmer. We know that the W. H. Letchford Company had offices in New Orleans and New York, and that Sarah Palmer lived for a short time in New York. It is

anyone's guess as to whether or not the two met in New York. The evidence is sparse. What we do know is that the Letchfords eventually settled in Morristown, New Jersey and summered in Watch Hill. For all their wealth, there is no evidence that they ever owned any real estate in Westerly.

Sarah Palmer Letchford was widowed in 1917. In 1920 her daughter Sarah Letchford Fiske, son-in-law Endicott Fiske and grandson William E. Fiske, age four, moved in with her. It is around this time that William Fiske began his yearly trips to Watch Hill with his mother and grandmother. Little mention is made of Fiske's father who held a job in Manhattan at the time. The reader must assume that he stayed behind in New Jersey while the rest of the family retired to Rhode Island each year.

William Fiske enjoyed a pampered childhood but led an ordinary life in spite of his wealth. He wrote more about his grandmother than he wrote about his mother. For that reason alone his childhood was indeed "curious." So vivid and eloquently written are the recollections in his memoir, *A Curious Childhood*, that we thought we would share just a bit more of Fiske's memories of Watch Hill and Stonington before putting the subject to rest. We hope you enjoy "Reflections on Fiske's *A Curious Childhood*" which begins on page 3.

We heard from long-time member, Jane Maxson about our story on Treasure Hill. She writes that J. Irving Maxson noted in his diary that he hung the gates for H.B. Joy's estate. Regarding the Japanese shop mentioned in Fiske's memoir, Jane recalls that the owners sent her grandmother a gift at the beginning of each summer. One lacquered box with three drawers was particularly memorable.

Our archivist, Zachary J. Garceau has kept up with his busy schedule even through these months of the COVID-19 pandemic. He continues to catalog our new ascensions, organize our existing holdings, and has updated our acquisition policy, all while holding down his full-time position with the State of Rhode Island and writing articles for the online publication, *Westerly Life*. Zack has provided his update on Page 8.

Lastly we mourn the passing of two of our members and the beloved son of longtime members Doug and Eugenia Rayner in 2020. See our tributes to these three departed loved ones under "In Memoriam" on Page 6.

Reflections on Fiske's *A Curious Childhood*

By Ann L. Smith

William E. Fiske was born in Morristown, New Jersey in 1916 and he died relatively young in 1978. Born into a moderately wealthy family, he enjoyed the "finer things," including many extended summer vacations in Watch Hill. Although he was surrounded by hired help (a nurse, chauffer, maids, and a cook), his family preferred renting rooms each summer instead of joining the ranks of the "cottagers" who populated the stately Watch Hill homes during "watering" season.

Fiske self-published the memoir of his childhood years in 1975. He called it *A Curious Childhood*. His choice of a title may have been a play on words, because not only were his experiences above the ordinary, he seemed to marvel at every situation in which he found himself. Consider his recollection of being put into his grandmother's "Little Room" for an afternoon nap on the day he and his parents moved in with her in 1920.

The walls, covered with a deep, pea green, pebble-surfaced canvas, were hung with small water-color representations of a dozen or more renditions of various family coats-of-arms reaching back through generations of long-gone Palmers, Phelps, Slarks, ... Some few did have accomplishments to their credit... there was, chiefly, Captain Nat Palmer, Grandmother's uncle...

Quite vivid too are Fiske's memories of his first trip to Watch Hill. Leaving Morristown in his grandmother's chauffeur-driven Cadillac, he, his mother and grandmother crossed the Hudson by ferry at Hoboken. They lunched at the Belmont Hotel [located then at the corner of Park Avenue and 42nd Street, *ed.*] and boarded the "one-o-three" train for Westerly at Grand Central Station. Peter, the chauffer, had been dismissed before their midday meal in order to check their baggage and drive to the Westerly train station in time to meet them with the car. Fiske's nurse had been sent ahead the day before.

Fiske writes at length of the Misquamicut Inn, his grandmother's recurring choice of lodging for many a summer season. The Inn took its name from the fact that it was located on Misquamicut Road, now known as Foster Cove Road. The historic structure (which today is a private residence) afforded a pleasing view

of the Pawcatuck River from the banks at Potter Cove. Each day, barring any scheduled plans, little William and his nurse walked the one-mile route to the Watch Hill beach. At noon his mother and grandmother would come to fetch him and off they would go to the next adventure.

True to his eloquent writing style, Fiske recounts the bathhouses at the *Pavilion*. "The dankly smelling, wet and sandy flooring of the dressing cubicles with damp bathing towels hanging on wall pegs were cousins to every seaside bathhouse that ever existed." Then, if he was lucky, a quick ride on the Flying Horse Carousel could be had if he begged his nurse in just the right way.



THE MISQUAMICUT INN AS IT APPEARED IN THE 1920S
PHOTO: *A CURIOUS CHILDHOOD*, WILLIAM FISKE, AUTHOR, P. 38

From time to time young William would set out with his grandmother to pay their respects to relations distant and close, living and dead. "For Grandma, born a Palmer, Stonington was Mecca," Fiske wrote. Indeed, although known as Sarah Letchford since her marriage, Fiske's grandmother was born Sarah W. Palmer in 1860 in Stonington, Connecticut. Her family home was known as "Redbrook" and Fiske's photo of it resembles the building which stands at 176 Water Street (on the corner of Broad Street). An 1868 map denotes that a William Palmer (Sarah's father) lived on Water Street next to the stately number 176, so this leaves much to speculation. One might guess that William Palmer acquired the corner house as his family and wealth continued to grow over time.

Fiske gives a lengthy account of his visit to the Stonington Manor Inn, a property once known as Walnut Grove in Stonington. The peculiar thing about this property is that the manor house was built by

(Continued on Page 4)

A Curious Childhood

(Continued from Page 3)

Fiske's grandfather Letchford's ancestors, but it was later owned by Charles Palmer who, according to Chelsea Mitchell of the Woolworth Library in Stonington, was a distant relative of Captain Nathaniel Palmer IV.

The Charles Palmer of Walnut Grove notoriety was a descendant of Amos Palmer of Stonington. In *A Curious Childhood*, Fiske mentions the existence of some equivocation as to whether or not the great house "had indeed been *of the family*. I think so; I seem to recall it being told me, but I cannot say I know it as a fact." So the question for the Woolworth Library became, "How were Amos and Nathaniel Palmer IV related?" The answer: "They both share a Walter Palmer as a great-great-great grandfather."

Popular columnist and former reporter for *The Day* newspaper of New London, Steven Slosberg has written about Walnut Grove twice over the last two years. According to Slosberg's research, it is known that James Ingersoll Day built the thirty-six room house on what was known as Day Place. Fiske's Grandmother, Fiske wrote, gave a somewhat different history, but the facts are plausible and are consistent.

...[T]his estate, for such it was...had at one time belonged to an aunt of my Grandfather Letchford. Her summertime retreat it had been from the humid heat of New Orleans from whence she came. Reputedly slave-built in the early eighteen hundreds, it was of Louisiana cypress expressly shipped north for the purpose."

According to Ancestry.com (which is member driven) Fiske's grandfather William Slark Letchford descended from James I. Day's wife's family, the Armitages. The "aunt" mentioned above appears to have been James I. Day's wife, Sarah Elizabeth Armitage, (actually Grandfather Letchford's *great-aunt*). Sarah Elizabeth Armitage Day was the sister of William Slark Letchford's paternal grandmother, Abigail Lyal Armitage.

Slosberg referred to his interview with Mary Thacher, former president of the Stonington Historical Society when he wrote that James Day sold Walnut Grove to Charles Palmer (see *Postscripts* 01/10/21). Charles or "Charlie" Palmer turned the property into

a sort of private playground. Charles Palmer's niece Eva Palmer Sikelianos wrote about Walnut Grove in her autobiography (quoting here from Slosberg's column of June 1, 2019), "There he had a private race course and riding stables, orchards and vineyards, brooks and millponds, sail-boats and row-boats, greenhouses, vegetable gardens, flower gardens, tennis courts, herds of cows and barnyards full of pigs and chickens."

In *History of Stonington* (published 1949) references to Walnut Grove and the Stonington Manor Inn pop up from time to time. Here is a sampling.

Aug. 4, 1888 - Trotting races at Chas. P. Palmer's private race track at Walnut Grove north of Borough attended by 1,000 enthusiasts. Heavy betting on match race between Happy Thought, owned by Theo. D. Palmer of Stonington and Happy Thought, Jr., owned by Geo. E. Tripp, Mystic Bridge. Former won and took \$175 purse.

Walnut Grove changed hands several times after Charles Palmer owned it. The *History of Stonington* refers to Walnut Grove's transfer of ownership on July 2, 1911 in these words, "Thos. R. Manners, N. Y. C., sold his residence, Walnut Grove, to Mary Eliza and Emmabel H. Heath and Annette S. Norton, who later turned it into Stonington Manor Inn."

Later, in the 1920s, Fiske would marvel at the opulence of this place; its vastness and the abundance of flowers both inside and out; the exquisite attention to detail in everything from the impeccably tailored doorman to the presentation of the cakes at tea.

Sadly, the Stonington Manor Inn was badly damaged in the 1938 hurricane according to historian Mary Thacher, and so was taken down. The grounds are now the site of the Admiral Fife Navy recreation area at the north end of Quana Duck Cove.

It can be said that William E. Fiske indeed had a curious childhood. His later life, from what we know, seems rather mundane by comparison. He worked in insurance and banking and retired in 1958 at the age of 42. Fiske's grandmother passed away in 1941 and he lost his mother in 1953. Fiske married Sarah Reese Pitney in 1954 but the couple remained childless. Fiske's father left this world in 1961 and Fiske himself died in 1978, just three years after publishing *A Curious Childhood*. Sarah Reese Pitney Fiske, his widow, died in 1994 at the age of 72.

**WESTERLY HISTORICAL
SOCIETY
AND BABCOCK-SMITH
HOUSE MUSEUM HISTORY
AWARD**



Once again an award of up to \$500.00 will be given to a person or persons, grade 5 through adulthood, who furthers the mission of researching, studying, and/or preserving local history in our community. Secondary consideration will be given to someone who exhibits a passion for history unrelated to the local community.

For convenience, an application form can be found on the following page of this newsletter.

Additional application forms and more info are available online at:

<https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/history-award/>

or at:

<http://babcocksmithhouse.org/>

Application or nomination must be submitted by April 1, 2021 to:

Westerly Historical Society
PO Box 91
Westerly, RI 02891

or by email to:

<mailto:whspresident@gmail.com>

In Memoriam

Alberta "Bert" Devine

Alberta "Bert" Devine of High Street, Westerly passed away at Rhode Island Hospital on May 24, 2020. She was the wife of the late William M. Devine.

Alberta will be sadly missed by her daughter, Lori Rose Freitas and son-in-law Stephen J. Freitas of Pawcatuck, Connecticut. Alberta is also survived by her sister Sandra dePorry and brother-in-law, Mark de Porry, a sister-in-law Margaret "Peg" Young, three grandsons and several nieces and nephews.

A donation of \$30 in Alberta's memory has been received from her daughter and son-in-law, Lori Rose and Stephen J. Freitas. We wish to express our heartfelt thanks for their loving gesture.

David Douglas Rayner

David Douglas Rayner died September 28, 2020 of natural causes after a decade-long battle with MS. He is survived by his loving wife of 31 years, Laurie MacCallum Rayner; sons: Kaelan W. and Brenton M.C. Rayner; parents Douglas and Eugenia (Jean) Rayner; sisters: Kimberlie Rayner-Russell (Edwin) and Kristen Rayner; nieces and a nephew and great nephew.

David's parents, Doug and Jean, have been long-time Westerly Historical Society members. David Rayner fostered the nationally recognized Mystic Seaport Community Sailing Program where he taught hundreds of children and adults watercraft arts and ran the generations-old Joseph Conrad sailing camp for children and young adults. David devoted much of his life to advancing the sport of sailing, including his service on the board of the US Sail, the national governing board of the sport.

Robert John "Bob" Brockmann

Robert John "Bob" Brockmann, 93, of Watch Hill/Westerly, died November 4, 2020. He is survived by his wife of 70 years, Marilyn (Frechette) Brockmann; seven children, John (Sarah), Mary O'Neil, Ann, Paul (Rhonda), Jane, Susan (Brad) Beattie, and Peter (Michaela); eleven grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

Bob and his wife Marilyn have been long-time members of the Westerly Historical Society and Bob was an active member of several community-based organizations, serving on the executive boards of many of them. He will be sadly missed by all whose lives he touched.



**WESTERLY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
AND BABCOCK-SMITH HOUSE
MUSEUM HISTORY AWARD**



APPLICATION AND/OR NOMINATION FORM

An annual award of up to \$500.00 will be given to a person or persons, grade 5 through adulthood, who furthers the mission of researching, studying, and/or preserving local history in our community. Secondary consideration will be given to someone who exhibits a passion for history unrelated to the local community.

Applications are available online at babcocksmithhouse.org or westerlyhistoricalsociety.org.

Application or nomination must be submitted **by April 1, 2021** by direct mail to Westerly Historical Society, PO Box 91, Westerly, RI 02891 or by email to whspresident@gmail.com

Name of candidate:

Address:

Phone:

Email:

If this is a nomination, please list your name and contact information:

Please describe the candidate's contribution to local history research, study, or preservation. Additional supporting information may also be submitted.

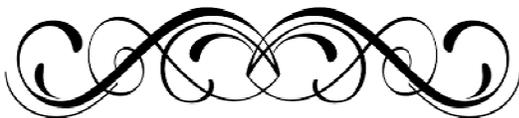
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The Westerly Historical Society executive board wishes to express our sincerest thanks to all our supporters of the last year. While only our major donors have been listed above, we continue to be grateful for the support of all our members, without regard to your chosen membership level. Thanks to all who have renewed their membership and continue to support us as we continue our efforts into the coming year!

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



From the Archives

By Zachary J. Garceau

In December 2020, the Westerly Historical Society obtained many new artifacts, but of all the new items added to our collection, one is quite fascinating despite its relatively mundane outward appearance. This item, a bound 3" x 5" booklet with the word "autographs" emblazoned in gold on the cover and donated by Thomas A. O'Connell, was owned by Gertrude Kingsley of Spruce Street in Westerly and is dated December 25, 1923. The pages of this book, which alternate between a faded white and blue, are signed by various members of the classes of 1924, 1925, and 1926 at Westerly High School.

While some of Gertrude's classmates merely signed their name (and in some cases, the class they were a part of), others were far more creative. This includes Mildred E. Cornell of the Class of 1924, who simply wrote "words fail me." Other writers also came up with interesting ways of saying very little, including Theodore S. Whitford who proclaimed "This page is blank and colored pink and now it's just as blank I think." In the spirit of transparency, we must note the page was not, in fact, pink.

While many of the signers in Gertrude's book may have used many words to say very little, some found ways to express their love and friendship in brief, but heartfelt words. This includes Ellen F. Frye of the Class of 1925 who wrote

"Leaves may wither,
Flowers may die,
Friends may forget you,
But never will I."

The sweetness of this entry contrasts quite strongly with the words of H.F.E Knight of the Class of 1926 who penned:

"I stood on the bridge at mid-night,
as drunk as a son-of-a-gun.
And I saw two moons in the sky,
when I should have seen but one."

In closing, we leave you with the words of Hazel A. Brown of the Class of 1924:

"May your joys be as deep as the ocean,
And your sorrows as light as its foam."