



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

September 2021

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Calendar of Events

Saturday, September 18

**AUCTION
AND ARTISAN MARKET**

**TREASURES FROM THE MUSEUM
AT THE BABCOCK-SMITH HOUSE
SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 18**

PREVIEW AND SHOPS OPEN AT 1 PM;
AUCTION AT 2 PM ON THE LAWN
BRING YOUR OWN CHAIR!

124 GRANITE STREET, WESTERLY RI
(401) 596-5704

DETAILS ON FACEBOOK OR
BABCOCKSMITHHOUSE.ORG
PREVIEW ITEMS AT AUCTIONZIP.COM (#3745)

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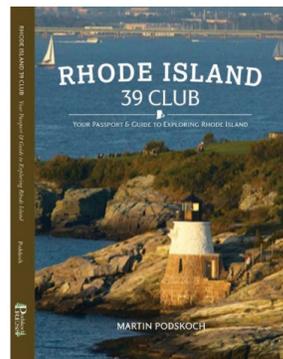
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MONUMENT TO THE FALLEN SAILORS OF THE *USS BENNINGTON*
FORT ADAMS STATE PARK, NEWPORT, RI
PHOTO: NEWPORT-DISCOVERY-GUIDE.COM

Sunday October 3, 2021 2:00 PM

The Rhode Island 39 Club:
Your Passport & Guide to Exploring RI
Author and historian, Marty Podskoch will talk about his new travel book, *The Rhode Island 39 Club*. The program will be held in the Carriage House at the Babcock-Smith House Museum (address above).



This program is free to Westerly Historical Society members and all members of the Babcock-Smith House. Admission for non-members: \$5.00.

Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

When a tragedy happens, survivors and eyewitnesses are forever changed by the powerful memories of the event. Every September we pause to remember the horrible events of 9/11/2001 and most of us who were alive at the time know just where we were and what we were doing when the horrifying news of it came barreling over the airwaves. Our parents re-tell of the shock and awe brought on by the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. The Great Hurricane of 1938 was another life-changing event, especially so for the people of Westerly, RI. Some equally tragic but perhaps lesser-known events touch most of us at some point in our lives.

In this month's issue of *Westerly's Witness*, we recapture for our readers events from May 26, 1954, when an explosion aboard the *USS Bennington* took place off the coast of Rhode Island. The loss of over 100 Navy personnel and the wounding of some 200 others made this event one of the worst peacetime disasters in U. S. Naval history. We hope you enjoy "Disaster Aboard the *USS Bennington*" which begins on the following page.



On Page 1 we have provided the details of this weekend's auction and artisan market taking place at the Babcock-Smith House. To see all photos of the items to be auctioned, go to Auctionzip.com and enter 3745 as the auctioneer ID. Be sure to click the link labeled "View Full Photo Gallery" to browse the unique and interesting items.

Also on Page 1 we have announced the date for our first in-person program since Covid-19 forced us to go virtual in early 2020. We are pleased to welcome author and historian Marty Podskoch who will speak about his new book, *The Rhode Island 39 Club*. See the feature article in the next column on this page.

Further on we have included an update from Westerly Historical Society President, Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr. There has been a lot of exciting news from the chair lately and we decided to let him tell you in his own words. See Page 4.

Lastly we are pleased to bring you the latest "From the Archives" column which appears on Page 5. Zachary J. Garceau is as busy as ever. (We are sure he has a clone that helps him do it all!)

Author Marty Podskoch Will Offer Program on New Work: *The Rhode Island 39 Club*

On Sunday, October 3 at 2:00 p.m., join author and historian, Marty Podskoch, for a talk about his new travel book, *The Rhode Island 39 Club* that encourages people to visit all 39 towns and villages in Rhode Island. The program will be held in the Carriage House at the Babcock-Smith House and is open to the public.

The idea for the *Rhode Island 39 Club* began after Podskoch read about Dr. Arthur Peach of Vermont who in 1954 suggested the idea of an informal group, the Vermont 251 Club, "to discover the secret and lovely places that main roads do not reveal."

As Podskoch traveled throughout the Adirondacks and Connecticut writing historical books, he marveled at the great diversity of cities and towns and the contrasts provided by the rivers, lakes, mountains, and seashores. He realized that most of the residents of these states had not traveled as widely as they could, and he wanted people to explore their beautiful states. The result was two new travel books: *The Adirondack 102 Club* and *The Connecticut 169 Club*.

Podskoch believed that Rhode Island also would benefit from a travel club similar to those created for the *Adirondack 102* and the *Connecticut 169*. Marty asked local writers describe their town's location, history, and important points of interest. (The chapter on Westerly is the contribution of Westerly Historical Society President, Thomas J. Gulluscio.) Membership in the *Rhode Island 39* is free and requires only a desire to experience all of what Rhode Island has to offer. Whether in a group or done as a solo excursion, there are no restrictions on how to travel our great state. So if it's by camper or car, horseback or canoe, the open roads and rivers await.

A dinner for Rhode Island is planned and will be open to the public. Members who have visited all 39 cities and towns and have had their books signed or stamped will receive a Rhody Red Award patch. After the October 3 presentation in Westerly, Podskoch, will make available copies of his book. The hard-cover, 8.5 X 11 book has 104 pages with over one hundred photos and maps and sells for \$21.95. See page 1 of this issue of *Westerly's Witness* for details on admission to the talk.

Disaster Aboard the *USS Bennington*

By Ann L. Smith

Seaman First Class William Vickers was stationed aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Bennington* in May of 1954. Thursday the 26th found him taking in the sight of an unusually placid, smooth ocean from Hangar Bay 3. Vickers was relieved early from his 0400-0800 watch and was enjoying the early morning stillness with cup of coffee he had brought up from the crew's mess a few moments before. It was just after six o'clock. Once he had downed the last of his cup, Vickers headed for his berthing compartment to grab a few hours of sleep. As he climbed into his rack he felt the ship rock suddenly. Something was wrong and the jolt was no wave.

The men on the *Bennington* belonged to Air Task Group 181 (ATG-181) and had begun their current mission four days before when they headed northward from Norfolk, Virginia. On this day they were traveling away from the Rhode Island coastline as early-morning training exercises were getting underway. Flight deck and catapult crews had been on the job since first light while those not involved in the flight operations were just starting their day.

Back on the flight deck, Captain William F. Raborn was overseeing the training exercises. The first launch of the day, set to fly from the starboard catapult, had to be aborted due to a minor malfunction. All remaining flights were moved to the port catapult. After the 13th flight had launched (other sources claimed there were 20), white smoke from Hangar Bay 1 was seen from the ship's bridge. The last jet had just departed and the flight crew was preparing to assist in the launching of some propeller aircraft

Captain Raborn ordered the general alarm followed immediately by the signal for fire quarters. Then fire was reported in the auxiliary machinery room. Before the damage to the machinery room could be evaluated, two or three violent explosions were felt throughout the ship. Accounts differ as to whether two or three explosions occurred, and the discrepancy has been attributed to different effects felt across different parts of the ship.

Sailors complained about having such an early "drill" as they hurriedly jumped into dungarees and T-shirts. In a heartbeat they realized that what was happening was not a drill.

The *Bennington* was commissioned in 1944 and

had seen heavy action during World War II both in the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. Following the war, the *Bennington* underwent extensive modernization, including the installation of hydraulic Type H Mark 8 (H8) catapults. According to Christopher Edwards who wrote for *Naval History Magazine*, the H8 could launch a total aircraft weight of 15,500 pounds to a speed of 105 knots within 1.69 seconds. Even though the H8 catapults represented the latest technology at the time, they were not without faults.

The explanation of what caused the explosions and related fires is a rather technical exercise. In simple terms, aerosolized hydraulic fluid escaped from the catapult machinery, filling certain areas of the ship with a highly combustible gas. No one knows for sure what matchstick, mess-hall event, or simple spark might have caused the horrific blasts. Deaths also were caused by mere asphyxiation due to the lack of breathable air in some areas. To read the technical details of how the catapult machinery failed aboard the *Bennington*, see the aforementioned article by Christopher Edwards ("Fire Down Below!") at <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2011/january/fire-down-below>.

The ensuing panic aboard the ship did not keep the *Bennington's* sailors from doing what they were trained to do. The personal stories recorded for posterity are both horrific and heartwarming. The hatches blown open, fireballs engulfing shipmates, the echoing of cries for help from sailors who died—these stir the deepest of sensibilities. There was the human chain some men formed to guide their shipmates to safety; others found two corpses in the mess hall which had filled partially with water. The first man, having been laid on a table, was carried out. The second one, face-down in the water, came to and walked out once he was turned.

Just before 0700 hours, all fires had been reported as extinguished. The sick bay was nearing capacity and the excess injured and corpses were being lined up on the flight deck. Smoke still poured from the lower decks. Captain Raborn brought the ship about and headed for Newport. All aircraft that could take off without a catapult were cleared from the deck.

(Continued on Page 4)

Disaster Aboard the *USS Bennington*

(Continued from Page 3)

Of the three medical doctors aboard, one died in the disaster. The other two, assisted by twenty-one corpsmen, cared for the injured until additional medical help arrived. Witnesses told of “helicopter after helicopter” airlifting the wounded to the Newport Naval Hospital. The article “Fire Down Below!” notes that sixty-four patients were taken to the naval hospital by helicopter and that another eighteen were taken ashore by boat. A small number were also sent to the Quonset Point naval base medical facility where the *Bennington* had eventually docked around noon.

Newspapers across the country picked up the story and *The Westerly Sun* ran multiple front-page accounts over the course of three days. Rhode Island lost two of its own that day: Henry R. Drew, a lieutenant from East Greenwich and Ernest S. Martin, AM 1, of Providence. The following year awards were made to 178 shipmates for individual heroism. The number of injuries, both major and minor, exceeded 200. A local survivor, William A. Collins of Newport got off the *Bennington* at about 5:00 p.m. and hitchhiked to the dock for the Newport Ferry. He called his sweetheart (who he later married) and his parents as soon as the ferry landed.

As the fiftieth anniversary of the *Bennington* disaster approached, Collins organized a memorial committee and raised funds for a monument and solemn ceremony to commemorate his fallen shipmates. The monument was dedicated fifty years to the day on May 26, 2004 at Fort Adams State Park in Newport, Rhode Island. The handsome granite marker displays the names of the 103 who died as a direct result of the disaster. (See photo on Page 1.) The program pamphlet given to attendees lists William Vickers (the sailor who drank his coffee on the flight deck) as one of the donors to the monument’s cause.

William Collins told reporters in 2004 that the accident had changed his life. The experience caused him to think seriously about his future. He attended Bryant College on the G.I. Bill and worked as an insurance claims investigator. Collins eventually became a widower but remarried in 1987 to Anne Buckley Brennan. Together they had nine children and stepchildren between them. A search of internet records suggests that Collins may have died in 2010.

President’s Notes

From the Desk of Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

Welcome to September! My favorite month. Plenty of summer left and an introduction to fall all at the same time.

This September as the WHS returns to our regular meeting schedule I’m happy to announce the welcome addition of several new members. Karen and Eliza Griscom and Cory Jacobson have joined the executive board. We are pleased to re-welcome Becky Jacoinski who also joined the board last winter and is back after a short hiatus. All bring fresh enthusiasm to our dedicated group. But I hope that our society family is not done growing. The board has been cultivating several wonderful projects in the recent past and we need more help. Several members have continued to wear multiple hats while making sure your society stays healthy and able to deliver the quality programs, newsletters and, as always, easy access to our archives through our busier-than-ever archivist, Zach Garceau.

If you have an interest in learning more about in what capacity you might be able to help please send me an email at whspresident@gmail.com with your contact information or just give me a call at (401)-529-5038. I always enjoy speaking with members and maybe we can find a way for you to help the society moving forward.

A few teasers for you about what you can expect to see happening in the near future. A friend of mine, Matt Haden has recently taken to treasure hunting with a metal detector and has been scouring local fields for long lost items, Matt recently showed me his collection and I want him to have an opportunity to share with you what he is pulling from the earth in Westerly! The only thing I will add is that I was astonished by the plethora of history resting inches under our feet for the past several hundred years or more!

The Westerly Police have committed to a program this year that allows all uniformed officers to wear a commemorative patch each month honoring a non-profit organization. I’m happy to report that the WPD have agreed to honor the Westerly Historical Society with a handsome patch depicting our logo. The month that this will be worn has yet to be announced and proceeds of these patches will go to the organization represented. These are also made available for purchase by the public. Details to follow.

Thank you all for your continued support of the WHS!

FROM THE ARCHIVES

By Zachary J. Garceau

The Stillman Documents Collection **(2021.0089 to 2021.0120)**

This summer, the Westerly Historical Society received an intriguing donation which has become a very welcome addition to our collections. This series which was subsequently labeled the “Stillman Documents Collection” contains a wide array of object types including:

- Land deeds for local properties between 1785 and 1903,
- Probate records for various members of the Stillman and Lewis families dating from 1808 to 1920,
- Land maps showing the boundaries of various plats,
- Miscellaneous letters and envelopes,
- Cash payment receipts for sundry items as well as estate payments,
- Banking and financial documents,
- Postcards,
- Court documents,
- Silver flatware, and
- A metal toolbox which housed all of the above items

The importance and historical value of this collection cannot be overstated, as there are multiple reasons why it is a significant addition to our inventory.

First, it expands the scope of our collection by increasing our holdings for items dating back to the eighteenth century. The oldest document in this collection is a deed dated the “15th Day of February in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty five and the ninth Year of the Independence of America.” Through this deed, Paul Brumbly of Westerly sold a twenty-two acre tract of land for “ninety-one pound[s] silver money” to Clarke Stillman of Westerly. This deed is useful for researchers as it describes not only the plot of land being sold but also the bounding properties, indicating the locations of the holdings of several notable landowners.

The second oldest item in this collection is a deed

dated 22 August “in the 17th year of American Independence A.D. 1792.” This deed codifies the sale of a plot of land by Joshua Clarke of Westerly to Clarke Stillman of Westerly. This plot of land is described as being approximately twenty-two acres in size and was sold for “Eighty-Seven Pound, Five Shilling, & Seven Pence ½ Silver Lawful money.” Both of the two aforementioned deeds contain portions of an orange wax seal meant to legitimize the transactions.

Another deed, this one dating to 20 May 1808, shows a major change in the exchange of property in Westerly. In this deed, Joseph Stillman of Westerly sold a lot of land to the heirs of Clarke Stillman. This land was purchased for a price of five hundred dollars, a contrast to the currency system of pounds, shillings, and pence used in 1785 and 1792.

The banking documents dating back to 1880 and extending up to 1973 also offer a unique look into the nature of financial dealings in the late nineteenth century. Among the items in this series are several letters to members of the Champlin family. One letter dated 1897 suggests that the family may have been quite well off financially, as the letters discuss the purchase of stock in numerous local banks and the division of remaining funds from a trust estate. The value of the estate prior to investing in the banks was listed as \$30,771.07 which would be approximately \$1.01 million today.

Another benefit of this collection is the ability to use the documents to reconstruct several family trees. In land deeds, it was common at the time to make note of any relationship between the grantors, grantees, and other parties. Probate documents are also critical to establishing family connections. While cataloging the records in this collection, I made note of any family relationships that were listed. In doing so, I found that there were several instances in which well-known local families were interconnected which also led to multiple property transactions between these families.

Individually, these documents are useful for researchers and historians. As a whole, the entire Stillman Documents Collection is a fantastic addition for the Westerly Historical Society.

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

The Westerly Historical Society

P.O. Box 91

Westerly, RI 02891



IN MEMORIAM-GEORGE ALVIN WILDES, JR.



George Alvin Wildes, Jr., 82, of Riverdale Road, Westerly, passed away at his home on Friday, July 16, 2021. He was the husband of the late Doris (Browning) Wildes. Born in Westerly, he was the son of the late George A. "Bucky" Sr. and Margaret Wildes. George retired from the U.S. Coast Guard as a Commander after 24 years of service. He was a communicant of St. Michael Church who loved the beach and clamming. George was an avid yard sale guy who enjoyed a big bargain, enjoyed playing cards with family and was a Conn. Sun and UCONN Women's Basketball fan. He was a long-time member of the Westerly Historical Society.

George will be dearly missed by his three children, Scott T. Wildes of Pawcatuck, Michael R. Wildes and wife Lynn of Dudley, MA and Margaret T. Fellows of Westerly; two brothers, Kevin Wildes of Westerly and

Richard "Dicky" Wildes of Groton, CT; five grandchildren, Emerson, McKenzie, Hayden, Jeremy and Meridan; and great-grandchild Jayce. George was predeceased by his brother Robert Wildes and his sister Judith Groppelli.

A funeral liturgy was held at St. Michael Church, 60 Liberty St., Pawcatuck on July 21, 2021 followed by interment with full military honors at St. Michael Cemetery, Pawcatuck.

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