



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

October 2021

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Calendar of Events

The Westerly Historical Society is in the process of contacting potential speakers for the fall, but as of this writing, we regret that we cannot publish any confirmed dates or speakers. Our program chairperson, Pamela Scott, will furnish the details of all upcoming programs as soon as they become available, and we will do our best to get any new program information to our members as soon as possible. Meanwhile, our long-range plans include the return of the January "Pot-Luck Dinner and Research Sharing Event." The date is yet to be determined.

If you have a pet project or a topic of personal historical interest that about which you would be willing to speak (5-10 minutes) we would love to hear from you! Our previous pot-luck events have proven to be enjoyable and informative. Please contact Pamela Scott at whsprograms@gmail.com if you would like to be a speaker at our January event.

Meanwhile we invite you to check out our events page for information on some extraordinary gardens in state that are all fun and interesting places to visit. Among them are the **Green Animals Topiary Garden in Portsmouth**, (open Saturdays and Sundays through October 31) and **Blithewold Mansion and Gardens**, Bristol. And while you may be a regular visitor to **Westerly's Wilcox Park**, information on its champion trees, native gardens and the Friends Perennial Garden will enrich your next park outing by providing interesting facts about the plantings there. More information with links for info is on our "Events" page at <https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/events/>

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Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

Experience has proven that the local historians among us enjoy a sense of satisfaction in learning and even writing about the little-known details of our past. And experts on Westerly's past are not just those who are Westerly Historical Society members. The Babcock-Smith House trustees, docents and supporters, the Chamber of Commerce staff and trustees, the local war veterans, people connected to the library and Wilcox Park and many others are often delighted to share their knowledge of Westerly's past with others. What that they would all become members of the WHS!

No matter how well-read any of us thinks they are about Westerly, many of us would be surprised to know that there is a plethora of interesting facts about the rest of the towns in our state as well. Our program presented earlier this month by author, historian, and teacher Martin Podskoch was a complete eye-opener about how much we really don't know about the towns around us. A brief program review can be found on the following page.

Speaking of programs, we are actively working on getting additional speakers so that we can continue our mission of researching, studying, and preserving local history in our community. Although we regret that our calendar is still in progress, we are looking

forward to the return of our annual pot-luck and research sharing event to be held in January. In addition, the Babcock-Smith House is finalizing its plans for their annual holiday bazaar. Folks can also find interesting virtual and in-person programs about Rhode Island's history at the Rhode Island Historical Society's website. See <http://www.rihs.org> for information on museums in the Providence area, walking tours, book presentations and more. Interested parties can submit their email addresses on the RIHS home page to receive updates on future events as information becomes available.



At our annual dinner in May of this year our archivist and Julia Award winner Zachary J. Garceau spoke about his upcoming book, *Great Stories from Westerly's Past*. While not yet available for sale, we have included an excerpt from Zack's book in this month's issue of *Westerly's Witness* beginning on Page 4. We hope you will enjoy reading about the Tin Tub Saloon, but (spoiler alert), to read the ending you will have to buy the book.

Lastly, board member and retired Social Studies Department Chairperson at Westerly High School, Brenda Linton, writes about her experience in mentoring a local high school senior in her research of the civil rights movement and women's issues. Brenda's summary appears on Page 6.

It's Time to Renew!

Westerly Historical Society Membership Renewal Form

Individual \$20.00

Patron \$100.00

Family \$30.00

Benefactor \$250.00+

Sustaining \$50.00

Name _____

Address _____

Telephone _____ E-mail _____

Newsletter in online version only (opt-out of printed copy via USPS)

Renew online at <https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/membership/>

Or if paying by mail, please make check payable to:

Westerly Historical Society and mail to:

P.O. Box 91, Westerly RI 02891

Thank you for your continued support!

Program Review: Martin Podskoch and The Rhode Island 39 Club

By Ann L. Smith

We first learned of the book entitled *The Rhode Island 39 Club* when Westerly Historical Society President Tom Gulluscio announced that he had been chosen to write the section describing Westerly. *The Rhode Island 39 Club* arrived in print earlier this year, and the book turned out to be a total gem. No ordinary tour guide, *The Rhode Island 39 Club* is a collection of essays representing each of the 39 cities and towns in Rhode Island. It contains the most important historical facts of each place as well as a list of the “must-see” attractions for each town. The concept was a brilliant one, because by having each section penned by a local, the best and most interesting content is presented.

The Rhode Island 39 Club is more than just a book, however. It is a whole movement whose notoriety is catching on. *The Rhode Island 39 Club* is a club where



there are no registrations or membership fees required. It can also be considered a competition where winning is its own reward. The object of “doing” *The Rhode Island 39* is to visit each town in Rhode Island and to get one’s book signed by a local resident, businessperson, or official of the town. We heard the

book referred to as a “passport book” and indeed that is exactly what it is. Also, the book has spaces throughout where stamps, stickers, and mementos can be added, customizing the book to one’s own travel experience. People who visit all 39 cities and towns receive the Rhody Red Award, a patch depicting a Rhode Island Red chicken (see insert).

On October 3 author Martin Podskoch was on hand to explain the concept and reason for creating *The Rhode Island 39 Club*. “People tend to stay in their bubbles,” he explained while describing how folks in general tend to seek out entertainment and recreation close to home. The Covid-19 pandemic produced even more isolation to the extent that people curtailed their usual outings even more. *The Rhode Island 39 Club* gives people a way to explore interesting places close to home without spending a lot of money, and many of the attractions are outdoors for those concerned with social distancing.

To illustrate just how much can be learned by visiting our neighboring Rhode Island cities and towns, author Podskoch engaged his audience with a little game called, “Name That Photo.” Some of the photos

were more easily recognizable than others, especially if they were taken in Washington County. Brenda and John Linton racked up the most points due in part to heir having already travelled extensively throughout Rhode Island and the U.S in search of Westerly granite. All in all the audience was treated to various scenes from around the state including the four corners at Tiverton, Federal Hill, and the Castle Hill Lighthouse at Newport, which appears on the book’s cover.

Podskoch recounted for the audience his previous endeavors and told how his previous passport books came into being. *The Rhode Island 39 Club* follows the *Adirondack 102 Club* and *The Connecticut 169 Club* where the object is the same in all three books. A retired teacher and historian, Marty Podskoch did not leave his love for history behind when he left the classroom. He has published ten books before coming up with *The Rhode Island 39 Club*, and all are important in preserving the little known historical facts of our region. Podskoch’s previous works include three books about the fire towers of the Adirondack and Catskill mountains, three on the Civilian Conservation Corps, and two collections of historical sketches about the Adirondacks entitled *Adirondack Stories* and *Adirondack Stories II*.

Exploring the Northeast and collecting historical data requires time and a lot of travel. Marty Podskoch has seen the best of the best (and probably a few forgettable places) in his extensive travel. The result is that his talk was colorful and engaging. The fruits of his labors are seen each year when his *Connecticut 169 Club* and the *Adirondack 102 Club* members meet for their annual celebrations. Everyone is welcome at the annual events and not all attendees show up with completed passports. Those who do receive their well-deserved patches and all enjoy sharing stories about the places they have visited.

The Rhode Island 39 Club will have its first annual dinner sometime in 2022 and Podskoch seemed excited with anticipation for what may come of his latest endeavor.

Copies of *The Rhode Island 39 Club* are available at Savoy Books in Westerly, online at Amazon.com, or directly from Martin Podskoch, who will autograph your copy. To order from Martin Podskoch, send \$24.95 to Marty Podskoch, 43B O’Neill Lane, East Hampton, CT 06424. Price includes shipping.

Great Stories from Westerly's Past

By Zachary J. Garceau

In the coming months, the Westerly Historical Society will be publishing my first book, **Great Stories from Westerly's Past**. This work is a compilation of fifty-six articles covering a wide variety of people, places and events from Westerly's history. The articles are organized based on several over-arching themes that provide a comprehensive look into the history of our town. Below is an excerpt from one story that is very near and dear to my heart as it involves my great-great grandfather, Natale Bonvenuto, and his business, the Tin Tub Saloon.

---ZJG

Court Cases, Dynamite, and Liquor: The Story of the Tin Tub Saloon

Being a genealogist by trade and having spent countless hours poring over records of thousands of my ancestors, I thought I knew everything I could possibly learn about many of my forebears, especially ones as recent as four generations ago. For this reason, I was surprised to learn of a series of incidents involving my great² grandparents that led me to uncover a series of fascinating events from Westerly's past.

Natale Bonvenuto, my great² grandfather was born in Acri, Calabria, Italy on 11 December 1864 to Angelo, a farmer, and Teresa (Morrone) Bonvenuto. On 1 March 1889, he arrived from Calabria at the port of New York and made his way to Rhode Island. Little is known about his early life in America, but he is presumed to have arrived in Westerly by 1895, because it was in this year that he married Christina Falcone, who had herself been born in Acri and arrived on 8 December 1894. For several years after arriving in the United States, Natale worked as a general laborer, most often finding himself as a quarryman, like so many of his fellow Italian immigrants. After several years of laboring in the granite quarries, Natale sought a different way to support his wife and four children. However, Natale's initial attempts at moneymaking found him on the wrong side of the law.

On Christmas Eve 1908, police visited Natale's home at 75 Pierce Street and seized four half-barrels of ale, ten gallons of whiskey, and a gallon of wine, likely the product of an illegal saloon being run out of his home. On 13 January 1909, on the orders of the Third District Court of Rhode Island, the Westerly

Police dumped all the seized liquor down the gutter.

According to the *Norwich Daily Bulletin*, "there was beer flowing down the gutters of Cookey Hill" and "an early morning opening saloon smell pervaded the vicinity." On January 15, Natale and Christina stood before the Third District Court, having been charged with keeping liquor with intent to sell. They both pled *nolo contendere*, accepting the conviction without admitting guilt. Christina, being the mother of three children including a two-year-old, had her case suspended for three months and was placed on probation. Natale, however, contended that his wife was the only one who had violated the law, as she was the only one to have sold liquor that evening. Despite his questionable defense, the judge imposed the full penalty, ten days in jail plus a twenty dollar fine, upon Natale. Natale appealed to have the jail sentence withdrawn in exchange for a higher fine, but the court was bound by statute and had no say in the sentence.*

Natale and Christina remained in the good graces of local law enforcement after their initial troubles. In March 1911, a man by the name of John Carney petitioned to transfer the liquor license from his Canal Street bar to Natale. At some point before February 1912, Natale's petition was accepted allowing him to transfer the license. The location of the saloon Natale took over was in the path of planned expansions being undertaken by the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad, and at the request of the railroad, he moved the building onto a piece of land on the opposite side of Canal Street. When the building was relocated, the land where it was moved to was believed to be owned by the railroad. This supposition was questioned by Concertino Grills the owner of the land directly adjacent to the saloon. Grills argued that the saloon was located partly on his property and brought a lawsuit against both the railroad and Natale Bonvenuto. Lawyers for Grills argued that the improper location of the saloon made the liquor license illegal.

In February 1912, Grills constructed a fence blocking the main entrance to the saloon. Patrons could still enter the building through the rear, but it was judged that the fence must be removed. Although the license to sell liquor was challenged by lawyers

*Note: The *Norwich Daily Bulletin* article mistakenly reported the number of children in the family at the time. The Bonvenutos were the parents of four children according to census data.-ZJG

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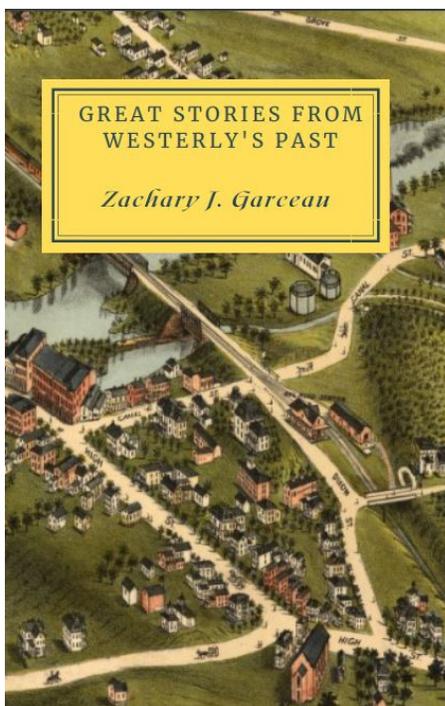
Great Stories from Westerly's Past

(Continued from Page 4)

for Grills, health officers chose not to order the saloon closed. At that time, the court also ruled that Natale could continue to operate his saloon at the same location until the title of ownership was determined. There would be many more claims in this case which would continue on for several more years. In the meantime, however, Natale continued to operate his saloon, which had since come to be known as the Tin Tub.

While the legal battles over the ownership of the Canal Street property continued on, Natale Bonvenuto faced more immediate problems for his business. On 4 April 1913, an unknown assailant set off a stick of dynamite under the saloon building at midnight. Thankfully, no damage resulted from the attempt aside from a small trash fire. Upon seeing the small blaze, the fire department was called in, but little effort was required. Detectives were unsuccessful at finding the culprit and Natale offered a fifty-dollar reward for discovering the attacker(s). This attempt would be the first of many at destroying the saloon over the following months.

The conclusion to this story and many more can be found in the Great Stories from Westerly's Past, available soon.



Volunteers Needed!

In last month's issue of *Westerly's Witness*, President Tom Gulluscio wrote about the need for more volunteers. While expressing the need for participation at the executive board level, Tom stated, "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, Zack Garceau."

But the truth is, we sometimes have special projects that could be completed more easily with just a **one-time helping hand** from some of our members at large. If you have been thinking about becoming more involved but are unable to make a permanent commitment, we would like to hear from you! If you would like to help with membership mailings (folding and addressing materials), furniture set-up and storage, or are able to help move display or archive items when needed, being an occasional volunteer might be just the thing that keeps you in the loop. You will also get a behind-the-scenes look at what goes into making our historical society run as well as it does.



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

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

The Westerly Historical Society

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MENTORING A HIGH-SCHOOLER

*By Brenda Linton, Westerly Historical Society Executive Board Member
and former Westerly High School Social Studies Chairperson*

Westerly High School currently participates in a Rhode Island Department of Education program entitled Pathway Endorsement Council Designation which encourages high school students to independently pursue one of their personal interests in one of many areas. Each discipline has its own parameters and evaluations. For a history endorsement, the student is required to choose and devote eight hours to a research project.

In the fall of 2020, Ms. Willa Hetu chose, as her senior project for graduation, to explore the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in the United States. She researched voting restrictions as well as women's issues. By spring, she wanted to highlight strong Westerly women and their achievements and I was asked to mentor her.

In her final essay, she wrote "I have been putting together information about women who have made an impact on Westerly's history. Because the women I

have been looking into have passed away, I have been able to use their obituaries, as well as articles, to understand their lives and to create a summary." Willa's list of notable Westerly women includes Julia Smith, the founder of the Westerly Historical Society, Westerly Library's long-serving head librarian Sallie Coy, and eight others who made an impact on our town.

Willa's favorite historical figure of local fame is Mrs. Rebekah Harkness: In part because Taylor Swift, a popular contemporary singer, bought the Harkness House in Watch Hill and moved in. Ms. Swift also wrote a very popular song about Rebekah Harkness and her sometimes eccentric behavior.

Ms. Hetu, a 2021 graduate of Westerly High School, is now attending Providence College majoring in History/Secondary Education. I thoroughly enjoyed working with her and hope to be a mentor again. It is a very rewarding experience and hope that others can become mentors too.