



# Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

September 2022

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## Calendar of Events

**Wednesday, September 14, 2022**  
**5:30 PM – 7:30 PM**  
**“Regional History Fair”**

### Westerly Library Terrace Room

This public event will showcase the numerous historical societies and museums in the region and will allow a unique opportunity for the public to meet and greet members of these various organizations while learning about membership opportunities and viewing some of their favorite treasured artifacts.  
Free and open to the public.

**Wednesday, October 12, 2022**  
**6:30 PM – 7:30 PM**  
**“The History of Education  
in Westerly”**

This presentation will include a discussion of the history of education in Westerly and describe in detail what it was like to be a student in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Speaker Jane C. Perkins taught first grade in Westerly before becoming the Lower School Principal at Claiborne Pell Elementary School in Newport. She later returned to Westerly to work as a math interventionist in the Westerly school system and serves as a Professor of Education at the University of Rhode Island.

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*Wednesday Programs Are Held  
at the Carriage House  
of the Babcock-Smith House Museum unless  
otherwise noted.  
124 Granite Street, Westerly, RI  
Free Admission  
Complimentary Refreshments*



# WESTERLY'S WITNESS

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year in January, March, April, June, September,  
October and November

The mission of the Westerly Historical Society is to  
research, study, and preserve the local history in  
our community. We are a dedicated, all-volunteer,  
non-profit organization that owns numerous  
historical artifacts and an extensive photographic  
collection.

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Find us on Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/WesterlyHistoricalSociety/>

## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

*Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.*

Welcome back to Fall! All though we traditionally  
take a break during the summer to relax, this summer  
was a bit different. Our program team helped me reach  
out to over two dozen historical societies and  
museums to join us in a first- of- its-kind regional  
history fair scheduled for September 14th at 5:30  
at the Westerly Public Library. Please join us and meet  
other local organizations working tirelessly to preserve  
our region's history.

Our trivia contest committee is putting together an  
amazing trivia night event for November 4th at the  
Windjammer! See Page 5 of this edition for  
registration info. Our foray into hosting a trivia night  
is just another example of how your WHS board is  
working hard to keep our members educated and  
entertained.

I'm pleased to inform you that our board members  
have volunteered for reassignment to fill vacancies to  
better serve the organization. Many thanks to Bob  
Boucher for volunteering to fill our treasurer's  
position, Becky Jacoinski for stepping up to fill our  
secretary position and to Cory Jacobson for his  
willingness to transition from secretary to membership  
chair! I couldn't do this without such a strong  
committed group of amazing volunteers!

Hope to see you at the history fair and trivia night!

My best to all,  
Tom

## EDITOR'S NOTES

*Ann L. Smith*

For several years each September we devoted  
some space in *Westerly's Witness* to the history of the  
Great Hurricane of 1938. After taking a few runs at it,  
and with the appearance of several good books on the  
subject in the last decade or so, the practice was  
abandoned. After all, what more could be written that  
hasn't already been told? After a long hiatus from the  
1938 hurricane, the Westerly Historical Society came  
into possession of a new, rather obscure, first-hand  
account written by a local citizen.

In July we received a carbon-copied, typewritten  
account of the 1938 Hurricane written by Mrs. A. M.  
Cottrell Jr., (a.k.a. Violet T. Cottrell). Violet Cottrell  
was married to Arthur Maxson Cottrell, the secretary  
of C.B. Cottrell and Sons Company (see *Westerly's  
Witness*, April 2022.) The writer seemed to have

sensed that her story would be valuable someday,  
since we know she made at least one copy. And the  
original? The original has already been seen and cited  
by other writers who have chronicled the '38  
Hurricane. It would lead us to believe that the  
document exists among the special collections within  
the Westerly Library. Nevertheless, we are grateful to  
the sender who furnished the Westerly Historical  
Society with our very own, well-preserved copy that  
bore a sticky-note with the following message, "I  
found this in my Aunt Lillian Brown's papers after she  
passed, I hope it will be a nice addition to your  
collection." We are pleased to bring you the complete  
transcript of Violet Cottrell's account of the Great  
Hurricane of 1938 which begins on Page 3 of this  
month's newsletter.

*(continued on Page 5)*

# The Great Hurricane of 1938

By Violet Tangeman Cottrell (1907-1986)

At shortly after three o'clock in the afternoon of September 21<sup>st</sup>, Miss Denise O'Brien and I went to Mrs. Cyril Moore's house on the Fort Road to watch what promised to be, as we thought, one of the usual September "line storms."

The wind, at that time, was blowing hard, but we had no reason to expect anything out of the ordinary. When we arrived, we were greeted by Mrs. Moore's little girl and the nurse, and after a few moments, we observed that rain was coming in under the window-sill, so we got bath towels and did our best to prevent water from coming into the living room. There was still no cause for alarm, and the storm was magnificent to watch.

After a while things began to happen very fast,----the steps leading up to the porch were swept loose and we could not keep the doors leading to the porch shut, so after several attempts, we maneuvered the piano into position and hoped that the door would hold. We took down the curtains, folded them and removed several other things to what we thought would be a place of safety. I believe we were either in the dining room or in the kitchen, when suddenly, the doors from the porch flew open, the piano was swept aside like a child's toy, and water flooded the living room. By this time, the sea was coming across the dunes, and the sea wall in front of the house was moving about, so we were very uneasy.

We went downstairs to the concrete garage underneath the house, and in a few minutes the Fort Road was awash, and the water was rising, inch by inch in the garage. We knew then that we were in terrible danger, and I thought I would try to get my car out, it being the heaviest, in an attempt to leave the house, taking the others with me. This proved useless, and we considered the possibility of venturing forth on foot,----anything to escape in the direction of Watch Hill. A great wave came over, almost drowning little Mary Moore and myself, and the telephone poles began falling like hail, so we realized that we must stay where we were. We retreated once more into the garage, the big fuse box creaking ominously against the wall, and the steps up to the front door suddenly sliding into the bay. All of a sudden, a huge hole opened up in the right-hand corner of the garage and we fled, just as a large portion of floor from somewhere else came around the corner. I think the cars were washed away by then, but so much happened so suddenly that I cannot be sure. We all held hands and edged our way around the corner of the

house, forcing open a latticed door which was choked up with sand, and making our way up a flight of stairs (the back stairway) to a door which led into the kitchen. The outside entrance to the house was protected on one side by lattice work. The door into the kitchen was locked, and we tried vainly to break it down, hoping to get in and somehow get up to the roof. We had seen the Watts' house vanish into the water, and when we could not open the kitchen door, we were prepared to face the inevitable. It seemed to me in those long minutes, that we were standing on the brink of eternity, and I know that each one of us had determined to be calm and courageous in the face of what seemed certain death.

I could see each wave coming, through the lattice work, and as each one came, the stairs shook more and more. Suddenly, there was a grinding roar and the stairs caved in, also part of the ceiling, plunging Miss O'Brien and me into the water. There was a very small space between the enclosing lattice work and the rising water, and calling out, "Come on!" to the others, I ducked my head under and got out. As it later developed, Mrs. Moore, Mary, and Margaret Kane, the nurse, could not have left at that time, for Mrs. Moore was the only one of them who knew how to swim. Just as we got out, I turned and saw that the house had settled and the exit was blocked.

Once outside, we were engulfed in a perfect inferno of white water, thrashing, sucking, pulling us this way and that. I could see Miss O'Brien being swept along, and my only conscious thought was to keep my head above the waves, as swimming was absolutely impossible. Suddenly we seemed to be thrown alongside one another, and in that moment, a mattress passed us. We grabbed and clung to it.

We looked back but could not see the Moore family, and our hearts sank. We were screaming at one another, as the wind was enough to drown out any normal voice, wondering whether we could go back for our friends, and seeing no possible way of doing so.

We had barely got clear of the house, when there was an appalling, cracking noise; the most horrifying I have ever heard. The house split squarely down the middle, toppled and thundered into the water. It was so awful, I think it stunned us. I can remember saying, "God, forgive us!" and asking Miss O'Brien whether she thought we could have reached the Moores in time. We never thought we would see them alive again.

*(Continued on Page 4)*

# The Great Hurricane of 1938

*(Continued from Page 3)*

After this, we headed out toward Stonington, and were afraid we were making for the open sea.

The flying wreckage was terrible; great planks and timbers and all manner of debris being lifted out of the water and missing us by a narrow margin. Our mattress was beginning to sink, and when we saw a flat, shingled section of roof pass us, we reached for it as if it were our only hope of salvation. After a while, the wind seemed to shift, and by and by we saw two shadowy houses which we saw indistinctly through a curtain of thick spray. Miss O'Brien said she believed one of them might be Mrs. Griggs' house, diagonally across from the Fort Road, and I later discovered she was right. During our voyage we had been lying first across the mattress and then the roof, facing the huge waves and debris,—in other words, our conveyance was going ahead but we faced in the opposite direction, and could see just far enough to try to avoid whatever came our way. Several things hit us, but not very hard, and with all its hazards, I preferred the water to the crumbling house we had left.

We talked a little and once the wind had shifted, we felt much more hopeful. We managed to sit up on the roof, once or twice, but it was too dangerous, and slowed up our progress. The water was cold, but not, by any means, freezing, and besides, there were many other things to think of. We passed a small motor-boat, dragging its anchor, and just missed being mowed down.

All at once, Miss O'Brien said she saw land, and I turned around and saw it, too—a few little pine trees, not very far away. As we neared it we were enclosed in wreckage, which we had to kick loose every so often, but the waves were subsiding and we came to the leeward of the Point. I put my feet down and felt the ground under them---the most wonderful experience I ever had.

The shore was littered with debris, and as we climbed over it, my wrist watch, which was still running, read 6 P.M. We figured that we must have left the Fort Road at about 5 P.M.

I had no idea where we were, but Miss O'Brien said she believed it was Osbrook Point, on the Connecticut shore. We were thankful to be alive, and started walking. We saw some sheep, and when we had walked a little further, we saw three men coming to meet us. They helped us over a stone wall, which

was quite difficult as I had lost my shoes.

The men, Jerry Shea, Ed Fiddes and Joe Reardon, said they had also come over from the Fort Road, and Shea was near exhaustion from a wound in the head and exposure. We helped him along and soon came to a shack, where he and Fiddes left us, Reardon continuing with us in a desperate attempt to get nearer home. We did not realize that all power had ceased, and that a telephone would be quite useless.

As we walked down the country road we had found, the water began to get deeper and finally reached our necks. We saw we could not get through and turned around to go back to the shack where we had left Shea and Fiddes. As we gradually reached higher ground, we saw the Moore family approaching us in the opposite direction. Our unspeakable relief and happiness at meeting them knew no bounds; it was the greatest joy I think I have ever known, after the anguish of believing them gone.

At the shack we were most kindly welcomed by Mr. Chase, who gave us hot drinks and the immeasurable comfort of his stove. There were six other survivors there, and I never before have appreciated so keenly the sight of human, friendly faces.

We were dreadfully anxious to get word to our families that we were safe, and shortly before 9 P.M. Jerry Shea and a berry picker, who had been marooned at Osbrook Point by the hurricane, started out for Westerly, accompanied by Mr. Chase, who was to take them as far as Mr. Davis' house. The tide had receded somewhat and we had high hopes that the men would get through to Westerly. Later, Mr. Chase returned, and during the evening Mr. Davis had the kindness to ride over to us on horseback, bringing us food and drink.

Miss O'Brien and I slept for a little while, and just after we woke up, around 1 A.M., we saw lanterns approaching the cabin and a party of rescuers arrived. Our two heroic friends had reached Westerly, and given the word that all of us were alive and safe, so Miss O'Brien and I left with the rescue party and got home at 3:30 A.M.

In this tragedy which has wiped out so many lives and caused so much suffering, I would like to pay tribute to the steadfast and uncomplaining courage of the men and women in whose company I spent those long hours following the storm. Their spirit may well serve as a shining example, and I might say that Mary Moore is one of the bravest children I have ever known.

## EDITOR'S NOTES

(Continued from Page 2)

Speaking of the Westerly Library, we heard from Nina Wright, winner of this year's Julia Award who emailed a correction to our Summer newsletter. We wrote that Nina was the head research librarian when in fact she is in charge of the Special Collections Department which includes the Local History Room. Nina writes, "The Local History Room is now staffed by the Special Collections Librarian, not volunteers. Volunteers are still permitted to assist however with covering evenings and Saturdays in order to expand the open hours." We apologize for the error.

If you have been keeping up with the happenings of the Rhode Island 39 Club, we have late word that the date of the first annual meeting has been changed to October 22, 2022. The event will be at Finn's Harborside in East Greenwich from 11 AM to 2 PM and the cost is \$39. Interested parties can contact Marty Podskoch at 860-267-2442 or email him at [Podskoch@Comcast.net](mailto:Podskoch@Comcast.net).

Now for the biggest news of the year, the Westerly Historical Society will sponsor our first ever **Trivia Contest on November 4, 2022** at the Windjammer on Atlantic Avenue in Westerly. Teams of up to six people per table will compete. A light buffet of hot and cold finger foods and a cash bar will make for a fun evening. See column at right for info.

### Notes on Continuing Improvements at Westerly Historic Cemetery #1

Westerly Historical Society board member Ed Fazio and Larry Hunter from the Rhode Island Historic Cemetery Commission teamed up with programs co-chairs Bob Peacock and Becky Jacoinski at the end of July to continue the efforts to improve Westerly's Historic Cemetery #1 owned by the Westerly Historical Society. Together they were able to dig out, raise, and reset nine gravestones including four that were almost entirely sunken into the ground and resembled nothing more than a one-inch rock on the surface. One was even found after several test holes hiding almost 3 inches below the surface!

These spirited volunteers also removed a broken fieldstone headstone and Larry worked on repairing the damage before resetting it the following week. They also re-cleared the access path from Route 1 which had grown back substantially since efforts by the larger team of volunteers in May.

Many thanks to all who participated for providing two hours of really hard work on a very humid day.



The Westerly  
Historical Society  
Invites You To

# TRIVIA NIGHT

*A night of competition to test your  
knowledge of our local history!*

Friday, November 4 @ 6:30 PM  
Windjammer Surf Bar  
321 Atlantic Avenue  
Westerly, RI

- Entry fee is \$180 per team
- Limit six players per team
- Light buffet included
- Cash bar available
- Tons of fun, fabulous people, and BIG PRIZES

A packet of six tickets will be mailed upon receipt of order. To enter, return this form with check or money order for \$180 to:

**Treasurer, Westerly Historical Society**  
**P.O. Box 91**  
**Westerly RI 02891**

**Team Nickname or Captain:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Mail to:**

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address** \_\_\_\_\_

**City, State, Zip** \_\_\_\_\_

Corporate Sponsors: Please contact  
Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr. at  
[WHSPresident@gmail.com](mailto:WHSPresident@gmail.com)



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



### **Are There Mattesons/Madisons in Your Family Tree?**

#### **THE MATTESON HISTORICAL CONGRESS OF AMERICA IS SEARCHING FOR NEW MEMBERS.**

If you, or someone you know, has a surname of Matteson/Mattison/Madison/Mathewson, you may be descended from Henry Matteson. Our common immigrant, Henry, came in 1666 into Rhode Island. The Matteson Congress has been meeting yearly since 1940 and would like to have you join us!

If you are not certain of your Matteson lineage, our genealogist would be happy to help you find your connections!

To find out more information please inquire at: [mhcoa.org](http://mhcoa.org)

or contact

Janaye Matteson Houghton  
Membership Chairperson  
[janayeh@hotmail.com](mailto:janayeh@hotmail.com)

### ***Nostalgia is Good For Your Health***

~ ~ ~

Syndicated columnist W. Gifford-Jones, M.D. states that researchers are reaching new conclusions about the health benefits of wistful affection for the past. He writes that many studies have demonstrated the way memories make us feel good. For example, a study published in *Psychological Science* found that nostalgia boosts perceptions of social support and that highly resilient people use nostalgia as a tool to beat back loneliness.

Another study published in the journal *Appetite* showed that people consumed more and reported more favorable attitudes towards healthy food when feeling nostalgic. Nostalgia also diminished the consumption of unhealthy food. A report in the *Harvard Business Review* recommended employers use nostalgia to make workers feel socially supported, energized, and confident, noting how this leads to more workplace creativity.

See <https://www.docgiff.com/article/a-little-nostalgia-goes-a-long-way/#> for Dr. Gifford-Jones' April 30, 2022 complete column on this subject.