



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

April 2023

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Program Notes

Wednesday, April 12, 2023
6:30 PM – 7:30 PM

“The History of the Bradford Dyeing Association”

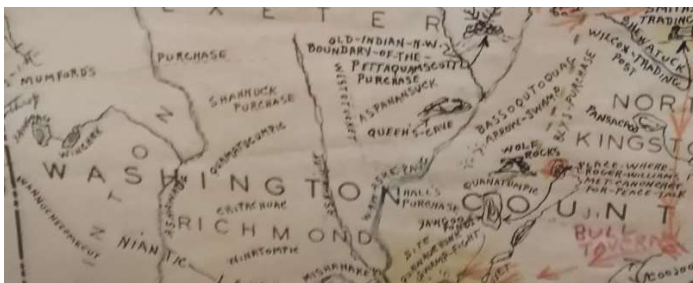
Please join the Westerly Historical Society as we enjoy a journey to the past. Archivist Zachary J. Garceau will present the history of the Bradford Dyeing Association while showcasing many of the photographs and artifacts from the Society’s Dwight C. Brown, Jr. Collection. Experience the history of the BDA mill from the very beginning in the colonial era through the modern day.

Zachary Garceau is the Vice President and archivist of the Westerly Historical Society. In 2014, he received a Masters Degree with a concentration in Public History, sparking his interest in the history of his hometown. In 2021, the Society published his first book, *Great Stories from Westerly’s Past*. In addition to his work for WHS, Zack is also a researcher for the New England Historic Genealogical Society and Chief of Program Development with the Rhode Island Department of Health.

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

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A SAMPLE TAKEN FROM ONE OF GEORGE E. MATTESON’S MAPS
IMAGE: ANN L. SMITH



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.

CONTACT US

President *Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.*

WHSPresident@gmail.com

Vice President and Archivist *Zachary J. Garceau*

WHSArchivist@gmail.com

Secretary *Becky Jacoinski*

WHSSecretary@gmail.com

Treasurer *Robert Boucher*

WHS Treasurer@gmail.com

Membership *Cory Jacobson*

WHSMembership@gmail.com

Programs *Robert Peacock and Becky Jacoinski*

WHSPrograms@gmail.com

Webmaster *Russell Soder*

WesterlyHistoricalWeb@gmail.com

Newsletter Editor *Ann L. Smith*

WHSNewsletterEditor@gmail.com



Social Media *Jane C. Perkins*

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President's Corner

Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

Hello friends, Happy Spring!

As we continue to finalize preparations for our annual meeting, dinner, and presentation, I would like to remind you to purchase your tickets early and plan to join us for an enjoyable evening. (See order form on the back page).

I am so pleased with the result of our collaborative effort with our friends from the Charlestown, Richmond and Quonochontaug historical societies as well as the friends of the Quonnie Grange with delivering a great room-filling program. Look for further programs to come from this group effort.

I'm happy to announce that new to your society is Jane Perkins filling the role as social media person. Now I always consider the pros and cons of Facebook pretty much every day, but in this application it's a pro all day long! Jane has been putting up reminders of upcoming events and posting interesting photos and captions to our Westerly Historical Society page. This has helped us share the many unseen or forgotten pieces of our richly historic town from within our archived collection. I look forward to seeing these postings weekly and I hope you do as well. I would like to ask that all members who have a Facebook account to please look for us each week and kindly like and certainly share with all of your friends. This could and should provide a most valuable tool to introduce us to a broader audience. If you are interested in joining the WHS board or even a committee, I encourage you to give me a call. I am always happy to chat and given enough time I'm confident I can recruit you to join our great team of dedicated volunteers that make the WHS a very special historical society!

See you at the annual meeting!

Tom

EDITOR'S NOTES

Ann L. Smith

In this issue of *Westerly's Witness*, we are pleased to bring you the program review of "George E. Matteson: The Man and His Maps." This presentation was the result of collaboration among several area historical and preservation organizations, including the Westerly Historical Society. The program was well-attended there is a tentative goal to present more joint programs, about four per year.

In writing the program review, I was uplifted as I reviewed the endless colorful stories copied into my notes, but frustrated too that I could not repeat them

all for our readers. For those who subscribe to the *Providence Journal* online, I highly recommend looking up the old feature articles on Matteson. Also, I have provided a link at the end of the program review where folks can get a better sense of the caricatures that appear throughout Matteson's maps. Although the images in the linked article have been taken down, the rich description of Matteson's Scituate map are revealing. In short, the value of Matteson's work is that people can absorb some little-known local history by enjoying whimsical drawings whose characters often talk, and reading (sometimes cryptic) comments that appear throughout his maps. A recap of the Matteson program begins on Page 3. Enjoy!

Program Review

George E. Matteson: The Man and His Maps

By Ann L. Smith

When Paul St. Amand was a boy of about twelve, a newspaper photographer snapped a picture of him with his grandfather, George E. Matteson. The occasion was one of many on which his grandfather was feted in public, because Grandfather Matteson was no ordinary man. Young Paul probably never dreamed that one day he would stand in front of audiences and recount the details of his grandfather's life.

George E. Matteson (1902-1977) died not long after Paul posed with his grandfather for the paper, and Matteson's story faded into memory for nearly fifty years. But time has a funny way of making us more curious about our past the older we get. For Paul St. Amand, his last three years have taken him on a journey spent organizing, preserving, and archiving the many maps his grandfather made. Along with these highly unusual and entertaining Rhode Island town maps, George Matteson's newspaper clippings and drafting equipment have stayed with Paul's family for all the many years since Matteson's death.

Steven and Linda Kornatz, members of the Scituate Preservation Society, studied St. Amand's collection and co-produced a program about George Matteson and his map making. Their most recent offering was presented at the Quonochontaug Grange Hall on March 18 to an overflow crowd. As a warm sunny breeze blew through open doorways, volunteers scurried to set up extra chairs, then a hush fell over the room as narrators Linda Kornatz and Paul St. Amand took their places at the front of the hall.

Linda Kornatz and St. Amand presented a lengthy background story covering the Matteson family genealogy beginning with the first Matteson to set foot on North American soil centuries ago. Henry Matteson was said to be the first Matteson in America, having arrived in the seventeenth century and who settled on Prudence Island. The Matteson story leading up to the birth of George E. Matteson, the program's subject, was well-researched and entertaining. Tales of unusual demises and curious careers provided an understanding of what made George Matteson into the rugged and talented individual he was.

Through the use of dozens of slides, program attendees were treated to many vintage images of the Matteson family, and several included pictures of George Matteson himself. Around the meeting hall were hung some of Matteson's maps, most of which



SECTION OF A MATTESON MAP OF JOHNSTON, RI
IMAGE: FACEBOOK.COM/GREATER RHODE ISLAND ROAMING

were as tall as small children. Shown in the image above is a portion of Matteson's map of Johnston, Rhode Island. Of note are the whimsical drawings which Matteson frequently inserted into his maps. The mini-cartoons were Matteson's way of narrating local history via his maps. It was said that Matteson peppered his maps with these drawings because maps and history go hand in hand. Although there is a running joke that Rhode Islanders give directions using landmarks that no longer exist, the phenomenon shows just how tied to our past we tend to be.

What may have been whimsy on Matteson's part has turned out to be valuable historical content in our time. Consider how an old-timer's story that was common knowledge in Matteson's day might get forgotten altogether with the passage of time. Forgotten, that is, had Matteson not left those many references and clues on his maps. For example, a curious note on one map reads, "Shift weddings took place here." What in the world is a "shift wedding?" Linda Kornatz adeptly explained that shift weddings referred to a custom where widows remarried wearing only a simple dress, or "shift." No pinafore, no fancy trappings—just their shift. This was a sign to all that the woman's new husband was not marrying for money, nor did he bear any guilt for the death of the woman's first husband. What about that picture of a man holding a bottle of rum and a piece of gingerbread? It refers to a custom of the lost town of

(Continued on Page 5)

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Babcock-Smith House Upcoming Events

Why Some Monuments Can't Seem to Stay in One Place

Sunday, April 16 at 2 P.M.

Presented by John Linton

This program will focus on the closing of cemeteries in San Francisco and the destruction of monuments there, and the movement of the Horace Greely statue in NYC, the John Mason statue in Connecticut, the Stonewall Jackson statue in VA, and the Soldiers and Sailors Civil War Monument in Providence.

At the Carriage House,
124 Granite Street, Westerly RI
Free to members; \$5 for not-yet members.

History Revealed by Monuments Between 1875 to 1920

Sunday, April 23 at 2 P.M.

Presented by Museum Volunteers

Once again, we are participating in Historical Cemeteries Month sponsored statewide by Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission. In collaboration with the River Bend Cemetery, we will be conducting a walking tour of a small section of the cemetery. Our goal is three-fold. By examining monuments, we can learn about family genealogy, significant events of the time period and artistic trends of the era.

At River Bend Cemetery
117 Beach Street, Westerly, RI



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63 Canal Street, Westerly

George E. Matteson

(Continued from Page 3)

Hanton City, (a part of Smithfield) where people would leave rum and gingerbread on their doorsteps in hopes that passing travelers would partake of the goodies and leave a few coins in exchange.

There is no doubt that George Matteson spent hundreds of hours of his free time in Rhode Island's back woods and off the beaten by-ways. Accompanied by his faithful dog, Dynamite Sam, Matteson frequented general stores, talked to locals, and probed the minds of any mail carriers he met along the way.



GEORGE MATTESON AT WORK ON ONE OF HIS MAPS C. 1941
IMAGE: FACEBOOK.COM/GREATER RHODE ISLAND ROAMING

(Dynamite Sam, the dog, was adopted by George after surviving a dynamite blast where he was thrown twenty feet into the air; hence the fitting nickname.) Matteson attributed the success of his maps, in his words, “to old people with long memories.”

For George Matteson, mapping the forests wasn't just his hobby, it was also the source of his livelihood. Matteson learned to make maps in 1922. As part of a military training program. (He had joined the marines on his seventeenth birthday in 1919.) His training would come into play later in life and provided the groundwork for what turned out to be a decades-long career with the Rhode Island Forestry Service. However, several years elapsed between the end of Matteson's military career and the beginning of his map-making days.

After the war George married his sweetheart, Helen, and they settled in Scituate. Later they moved to Cranston, then to Hope, Rhode Island. They kept cows and chickens and made money selling milk,

eggs, and poultry. By 1927 the Mattesons had five children and moved to Johnston, RI. (A sixth child, a son, was born several years later.) In 1929 the Mattesons lost everything after the historic stock market crash. But 1930 found George with a part-time job with the Rhode Island Department of Natural Resources and the Division of Forestry Service. Matteson eventually landed a full-time job with the division of Forestry Service as a patrolman, but his career was nearly cut short as soon as it had begun. What started as a political dust-up resulted in Matteson's firing where he was simply part of the collateral damage. The Forestry Service was sadly corrupted, but when facts came to light, George re-gained his position and quickly moved up the ranks. He achieved the position of ranger and used his map making skills in his work. George was able to make quick aerial maps while forest fires raged below him. He would then launch the sketches by parachute to aid firefighters working on the ground.

Matteson was appointed head of the Rhode Island Forestry Service and implemented a complete overhaul of his division. He also coordinated projects with the Civilian Conservation Corps which maintained eight camps across Rhode Island.

In Matteson's personal work, he inserted drawings of himself as a forest ranger. He penciled the initials “R.I.F.S.” (Rhode Island Forest Services) or “G.M.” (George Matteson) on his character's shirt. His maps became as much entertainment as they were informative. Newspapers carried feature articles on George Matteson throughout his career, highlighting his talents and professionalism. The photo at left appeared in the *Providence Journal* in 1941. In 1976, a year before he died, George Matteson was named Coventry's Citizen of the Year and again he was featured in the local paper. At his passing, he left this world with a “to-do” list of maps that would never be drawn.

George Matteson's grandson and program narrator, Paul St. Amand, became a professional in the design/build industry and credits his grandfather's drawing ability for his inspiration in becoming involved in architecture. Partly as a result of Paul St. Amand's recent work with Steven and Linda Kornatz, George E. Matteson was inducted posthumously into the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame in February 2023.

For further reading about George E. Matteson and his map of Scituate in particular, an interesting article is available at <https://johnbalebooks.wordpress.com/2014/12/23/george-e-matteson-map-maker/>

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



Westerly Historical Society Annual Meeting and Dinner Ticket Order Form

Location: The Haversham Inn
336 Post Road, Westerly RI 02891

This year's dinner will consist of a buffet featuring beef sirloin tips, chicken francese, pasta marinara and seasonal vegetables. Assorted pastry, coffee, and tea are included.

Please send me ____ tickets for the Westerly Historical Society Annual Meeting and Reception on May 24, 2023 @ 40* each.

Enclosed please find my check for \$ _____
Name(s) _____
Address _____
City _____
State and Postal Code _____

**Ticket price has been subsidized in part this year following a decision by the WHS Executive Board.*

Cocktails at 5:30 PM (Cash Bar)
Dinner will be served at 6:00 PM

Send this form with your check or money order before **May 17th** to:

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

Internet orders may be placed on our website at
<http://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/annual-meeting>

Or click on the words "Annual Meeting" from our home page.

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