



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

Summer 2023

Westerly Historical Society Executive Board 2023-2024

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Program Notes

Wednesday, June 28, 2023 6:00 PM

“Last Call:

Rum Runners, Bootleggers & Watch Hill.”

At the Lanphear Livery, One Bay Street
Captain Jack Spratt, Presenter

In partnership with the Watch Hill Conservancy, the Westerly Historical Society will co-sponsor the first of the Lanphear Livery Live! talks scheduled for summer, 2023.

Jack Spratt will discuss how the wealthy summer guests and cottagers, along with hotel owners, ignored the law in Watch Hill during the Prohibition era. He will speak about rumrunners off-loading spirits at the Watch Hill docks and in the coves while avoiding detection by the Coast Guard. The talk will include anecdotes of local fishermen dragging for booze in the bay, and bootleggers and hijackers playing cat-and-mouse with each other, the police, and the Coast Guard.

Come and enjoy a relaxing evening at the Lanphear Livery, One Bay Street, in Watch Hill. This historic landmark building has undergone an extensive restoration beginning in 2013. The rebuild was completed in 2016, and in 2017, spaces for public use including the Chaplin B. Barnes Reading Room were completed. The building is also home to the Watch Hill Conservancy. Retail shops and an exhibit about the history of the livery building share the premises.

Capt. Jack Spratt is a tour boat captain and is known for his historical tours of Watch Hill and Fishers Island Sound, and his talks on local history. His most recent work is the book *Watch Hill, 1886*. Jack divides his time between Watch Hill and Old Lyme, Connecticut. When not with family or running his boats, Jack can be found surrounded by historical papers and books, in the stacks, or at the National Archives uncovering little-known bits of lore. Jack is a retired Watch Hill firefighter and Search and Rescue certified rescue boat coxswain, and attended Cornell University.

In this Issue

Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith..... Page 2

President's Corner

Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr. Page 2

Annual Meeting Held;

Awards Conferred..... Page 3

Annual Meeting Keynote Speaker

Larry Hunter Addresses Guests... Page 4

Program Review-Zachary J. Garceau

On the History of BDA..... Page 5



NAPATREE POINT WATCH HILL – PHOTO: 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.

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President's Corner

Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

Hello friends,

I can honestly say that seeing everyone at our annual meeting/May dinner always gives me great joy! Most of our members support us from the sidelines through the year and we might get lucky to see each other at a program now and again. It's when you all come out to join us for our annual meeting it's a real treat! We have such amazing friends and I just love seeing you all.

Our May meeting usually means we have earned a hiatus for the summer but not this year. I participated in a great planning meeting yesterday with our new friends at the Watch Hill Conservancy getting the details of our joint June program ironed out. We will be co-hosting a program by a WHS friend Jack Spratt called "Rum Runners, Bootleggers and Watch Hill" on June 28th at One Bay Street.

Most of you know by now that Ann Smith has officially retired from the board as of the May meeting. Well, I'm sad to say that another longtime member, Brenda Linton, has chosen to retire as well and spend more time traveling and visiting her out-of-state grandchildren. Brenda has been a rock since I joined the society in 2011; always there with sound advice and a much-needed push from time to time as she single-handedly attempted to cure my chronic case of procrastination. I wish Brenda all the luck and happiness in her life's travels and I hope she knows how much I have appreciated her service to the WHS and how much I value her friendship!

Have a safe and enjoyable summer!

See you soon,

Tom

EDITOR'S NOTES

Ann L. Smith

As some of our readers already know, this issue of Westerly's Witness is the last issue in which I will be editor. It was nearly ten years ago that we suddenly found ourselves without an editor, then I jumped in with both feet. What was supposed to be a temporary stint turned out to be a ten-year run. Who knew?

I got assignments on things I was sure I would hate. What did I know about WWII Victory Ships, the history of the Westerly Boy Scouts, or the steamboats of the Pawcatuck River? But I never regretted writing any of those stories. I learned about those things and many more of the stuff that made Westerly great.

I learned how the library came to be; add to that

the post office, the park, the railroad station, Dixon Square, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Sabbatarians, the Watch Hill Lighthouse, and a thousand things more.

Like so many others who didn't start out here, I've come to know that Westerly is the best place on earth. I love all the people, places, and things that make Westerly my home. And I want to thank all the people I've met and worked with since I set foot in this town. You taught me, accepted me, put up with me, and grew me into the person I needed to be. That goes for my fellow board members and everyone else whose names are too numerous to mention. I hope you all know who you are.

So just as it was ten years ago, the question at hand is, "Who will write the newsletter?" I know it will be one of you.

Annual Meeting Held; Awards Conferred

The Westerly Historical Society held its annual meeting on May 24, 2023 at the Haversham where approximately fifty members and guests gathered to enjoy a delicious buffet dinner and a short presentation by historic cemetery expert, Larry Hunter.

Between dinner and Larry Hunter's talk, Tom Gulluscio presented a slideshow that highlighted our organization's achievements during 2022. Later two awards were bestowed on the deserving recipients.

Among the slides was a recap of the program committee's activities. Of note was the report of the Westerly Historical Society's recent efforts in establishing an intercommunity presence. Beginning with WHS's regional history fair held in September of 2022, and continuing with another collaborative event at the Quonochontaug Grange in March of this year, the program committee will continue co-sponsoring events into the summer. See Page 1 for information on the June program to be held in Watch Hill.

Each year the Babcock-Smith House partners with the Westerly Historical Society to award a \$500 History Award to any person, fifth grade and up who has made a significant contribution to our local history by their work on a specific project. This year's co-sponsored History Award was given to Donna Celico for her research over the last two years, with particular recognition for her project, "The Brides of Wilcox Park."



HISTORY AWARD RECIPIENT DONNA CELICO.
AT LEFT IS WESTERLY HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRESIDENT,
THOMAS J. GULLUSCIO, JR. PHOTO: ELLEN MADISON

Donna's project involved researching all the wedding parties who have used Wilcox Park as a backdrop for their formal wedding photos going back over the last one hundred years. Donna found that most of the wedding gowns used by the brides still

existed, and were available for use in the exhibition. Using models to show off the vintage wedding gowns, many of the brides who first wore them appeared with their gowns as each couple's story was told by the narrator. The event, most appropriately, took place in Wilcox Park.



JULIA AWARD WINNER, ANN L. SMITH
PICTURED AT LEFT: THOMAS J. GULLUSCIO, JR.
PHOTO: ADAM SMITH

Ann Smith, pictured above, was the recipient of this year's Julia Award. Unlike the history award, the "Julia" recipient is selected by the members of the Westerly Historical Society executive board, and is bestowed on an individual who has made a major contribution to the preservation of Westerly's history. In her ten-year stint as newsletter editor for the Westerly Historical Society, Ann Smith has shown a remarkable dedication the preservation of our local history. Her program reviews have done much to chronicle the events presented by WHS. Her research pieces on Westerly's people, places, and things have been informative and entertaining. Ann also served as the Westerly Historical Society treasurer for ten years, nine of which overlapped her term as newsletter head.

Upon receiving her award, Ann announced that she is stepping away from her role as newsletter editor and that she is retiring from the WHS board effective June 1, 2023. Society president, Tom Gulluscio thanked Ann for her eleven years of service to the board and presented Ann with a silver engraved pen in recognition of her longevity with WHS.

Ann Smith offered a few remarks of thanks and dedicated her award to her late husband, Herb. In a speech that recounted how she met and married her husband in New Jersey, Ann told how they eventually moved to Westerly, her husband's home town. Ann said, "Without him, I never would have known Westerly."

Annual Meeting Keynote Speaker Larry Hunter Addresses Guests

By Ann L. Smith

The Westerly Historical Society welcomed Larry Hunter on May 24th to talk about his work with the Rhode Island Advisory Commission on Historic Cemeteries. As a commissioner assigned Washington County (and to the Westerly area in particular) Larry has no shortage of work when it comes to helping the community preserve its historic cemeteries.

At his previous presentation to the Westerly Historical Society in February of this year, Larry emphasized the importance of the proper cleaning and restoration of historic headstones and monuments. At the annual dinner on May 24th, he gave an update of the projects he has been working on recently, including work done in Wilcox Park in Westerly. His experience there showed how much the average person tends to rely on traditional methods for cleaning monuments as opposed to using specialized techniques for vintage stones. In the case of Wilcox Park, staff members at first were inclined to hire a professional power-washer and apply muriatic acid to the large war memorial rather than rely on more gentle and eco-friendly techniques. With Larry's help, the monument was cleaned using D-2, a biological cleaner, and a simple soft brush with water.

Larry Hunter stressed that harsh methods used to clean headstones and monuments often result in more harm than good, often damaging historic inscriptions forever. In addition to discussing his work at Wilcox Park, Larry spoke about the historic graves located at the Babcock Historic Cemetery on Watch Hill Road. This cemetery is located along the Pawcatuck River near the intersection of Winnapaug Road. The lot contains the graves of John and Mary Babcock, said to be the first whites to settle in Westerly. In addition to John and Mary Babcock, many other Babcocks are buried here, including Joshua Babcock who ran a post office and general store on Granite Street.

Almost every historic cemetery that Larry Hunter visits is in need of some form of restoration. Grave markers are often completely sunken underground, and are located by using a probe thrust into the dirt at regular intervals. "Raising the stones is something like an archeological dig," Hunter said. "Great care must be taken not to damage anything." And so his job is often a dirty one. Larry says he is still learning as his work continues. He shares his knowledge with other volunteers so as not to damage any of the historic stones with which they are working.

In addition to the time-consuming physical work involved in maintaining historic cemeteries, Larry Hunter maintains a kind of watch-dog role concerning local regulations. He referenced two Rhode Island state laws that many people may not be aware of. First, there is a general law that states all historic cemeteries must be listed on the official plat maps of towns. Second, there is a general law prohibiting any construction of buildings within twenty-five feet of historic cemeteries.

Larry's goal is to continue getting to know Westerly's people and familiarizing himself with our historic cemeteries. He referenced the important book by Frederic Denison, *Westerly and Its Witnesses* (1876) which contains an appendix listing Westerly's Historic Cemeteries at the time the book was published. Not only are the cemeteries' locations described in detail, there is a listing of those known to be buried in each. This information is helpful when someone suspects that a stone may be submerged under the earth. Other books mentioned by Larry are works published by the Westerly Historical Society, including works by the late Dwight C. Brown, Jr., Thomas A. O'Connell, and Zachary J. Garceau. These latter offerings often are useful when researching genealogical information of local families.



LARRY B. HUNTER - PHOTO COURTESY OF FACEBOOK.COM

A planned tour of Westerly Historic Cemetery #1, owned by the Westerly Historical Society and located next to the dinner venue was omitted due to the impending rain and darkness at the end of the talk. Cemetery #1 is located on the southbound side of Route 1, just north of the Haversham Restaurant.

Folks who would like to contact Larry Hunter can check out Larry Hunter's Facebook page, Cemeteries R Us, or email him at Lphunter53@Yahoo.com

Program Review: Zachary J. Garceau On the History of BDA

By Ann L. Smith

On April 12, 2023, The Westerly Historical Society was pleased to present Zachary J. Garceau as its featured speaker. The topic was the history of the Bradford Dyeing Association and consisted of a narrated slide presentation with a display of BDA artifacts from the Westerly Historical Society archives.

The late Dwight C. Brown, Jr., a long-time employee of BDA, was a member of the Westerly Historical Society executive board until his passing in 2018. Upon his death, his family donated a large collection of photographs, writings, tools, and ephemera, a great portion of which related to the Bradford Dyeing Association. In 2017 Dwight Brown contributed his own version of the BDA history which was published in *Westerly's Witness* in October of that year. (The 2017 Dwight Brown article and other past newsletters can be viewed online at westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/newsletters/.)

Around that same time, Dwight traveled around the area telling the BDA story to area historical societies and community groups, packing the room wherever he went.

Dwight may be gone from our midst, but interest in the history of the Bradford Dyeing Association has not waned. Thanks to WHS archivist Zachary Garceau, the tradition of telling the BDA story lives on. And just as Dwight Brown drew standing-room-only crowds, so did Zack Garceau when he recounted how Bradford Dyeing came to be, and how it was an important part of the community for decades.

Fabric mills by other names stood at the site of the Bradford Dyeing Association for over a century prior to the establishment of BDA. English investors came to the area representing the Bradford Dyers Association, which operated textile mills throughout the world in the early part of the twentieth century. The new mill was to become a subsidiary of Bradford Dyers and would bear the name, Bradford Dyeing Association. In 1911, the village of Niantic was officially renamed Bradford following a multi-million-dollar expansion project at the mill.

By 1919 workers had fought for and won the right to an eight-hour work day with paid overtime and Saturdays off. By the 1930s a union-run company newspaper called *The Informer* kept the regular workers abreast of all work-related issues. The paper offered a blow-by-blow account of a slapping incident in 1943, for example, that sparked a walkout. Zack

Garceau told his audience that the War Labor Board finally forced the workers to return to their posts after threatening to bring in the FBI.

The War Labor Board held sway over BDA in 1943 because seventy percent of the work done at the mill was in fulfillment of government contracts. At the height of World War II, employment there had increased to over 1,200 workers with many females filling the government orders for khaki, parachute cloth and nylon.


After World War II, many businesses which were supported by the war effort failed, but the Bradford Dyeing Association found its niche by producing goods for certain specialty markets, such as wash-and-wear cotton blends, and double-knit polyesters. Competition became brisk by the 1960s and profits at BDA once again began to dwindle. British ownership continued until 1963 when the mill was sold to the E. J. C. Corporation of Rhode Island.

In the 1970s the U.S. economy suffered under a recession and the international oil crisis. On June 25, 1974 Bradford Dye closed with the loss of 460 jobs. Through the cooperation of the Town of Westerly, union representatives and new ownership, the Bradford mill was reopened in January, 1975. The mill continued to struggle even with the continuation of some military contracts, and closed again on March 3, 1987. Some problems with military orders were resolved quickly, however, and the mill soon resumed operations. Fabric processing and finishing continued at BDA until the company closed its doors for good in 2008.

Program attendees spent the remainder of the evening trading stories about life at the mill and in the surrounding neighborhood. The mill-owned houses were said to be cheaply built and had little or no insulation. Others remembered how workers had the option to buy fabric leftovers. Attendee Florence Madison recalled wearing home-made dresses to school cut from these overruns.

Program attendees were treated to a small exhibition of BDA artifacts. A large collection of ID badges used during the WWII were displayed, as well as some fabric samples and accounting ledgers. Zack is asking for help in putting names to the faces on the badges since they are marked with numbers only. If you can help, please email whsarchivist@gmail.com.

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