



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

October 2023

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Program Notes

The Westerly Historical Society would like to extend our appreciation to Marty Podscotch for the interesting presentation on the many projects of the Civilian Conservation Corps. The program was held in collaboration with the Charlestown Historical Society, Richmond Historical Society, Quonochontaug Historical Society, and the Friends of the Quonochontaug Grange. Approximately 45 guests attended this informative program. He is the author of eleven books and is an excellent speaker. A video recording of his presentation will be available soon on our website. For more information on Marty, please visit his website; www.martinpodskoch.com

In this Issue

Program Notes	Page 1
Presidents Corner	Page 2
Editors Notes	Page 2
Westerly Police History – 150 Years.....	Page 3
Special Announcements	Page 4
Additions to our Archives.....	Page 5
Discovering Westerly's Cemeteries.....	Page 6
Discovering Westerly's Cemeteries.....	Page 7
Discovering Westerly's Cemeteries.....	Page 8
Discovering Westerly's Cemeteries.....	Page 9
Those Pesky Pies – Part 1	Page 10
Those Pesky Pies – Part 1	Page 11
Sponsor Recognition	Page 12

Program Presenters Needed

We are always seeking program presenters. If you would like to speak on your favorite Westerly related subject, please contact us! These programs are normally held on the second Wednesday of the month at the Carriage House of the Babcock-Smith House from 6:30 to 7:30 PM.

Online Newsletter Reminder

We have increased the size and amount of color photos and color printing in the online version of this newsletter. If you are reading a mailed hard copy of the black and white version, we strongly encourage you to view the full color online version on our website.

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

The password this month is **WHS202310**



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,

With cooler temperatures and shorter days, it appears that Summer is fading away but one thing that is not folding away is our enthusiasm for local history! Your WHS has been busy adding new and interesting pieces to our collection. This is due in large part to our thoughtful and generous members making extraordinary contributions. We are also adding new updated software to make it far less laborious to show you what treasures we have in our collections.

We even added a new Executive Board member! Please help me in welcoming Greg Pettys, Greg has an expansive history in videography and narration and he is an all round nice guy to have on board.

October is membership renewal month so please look for your renewal form coming to you soon. Please remember memberships make nice gifts to friends and family near and far!

If you have an interest in sitting in on a meeting just let me know. It is the first step to becoming a board member of a dedicated and fun group!

My best,

Tom

EDITOR'S NOTES

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We have received numerous positive reviews of our "new" newsletter format as well as several excellent suggestions on future articles and topics. We sincerely appreciate the engagement of our members and we certainly look forward to continuing to expand and develop our newsletter to meet your needs and wishes.

As always, please let us know what you think!

This is your newsletter!

Westerly Police – Officer Duties and Pay – 125 Years Ago

By Robert Peacock

As the Town of Westerly recognizes this year to be the 150th Anniversary of the official establishment of the Westerly Police Department, we thought it would be interesting to randomly look back about 125 years at some of the oldest newspapers in the archives of the Westerly Historical Society to see a snapshot in time of what the police department duties included and how the police officers were paid.

According to the December 8th, 1898 edition of the Westerly Narragansett Weekly, the regular monthly meeting of the Westerly Town Council included accepting a report from E. W. Coon, the Chief of Police. The report indicated “10 arrests made, 1 fire alarm sounded, and 4 liquor raids made.”

During the same meeting, W.N. York, S.W. Collins, and J.L. Nash were appointed police constables at Watch Hill without pay.

The newspaper expanded on the “1 fire alarm sounded” mentioned in the Police Chiefs report with a front page article recounting “A Midnight Fire” with a secondary headline noting that “The Alarm Sounded at 11:30 O’ Clock Friday Night – An Overheated Stove the Cause – Few Heard the Alarm – The Second Fire In the Same Building Within a Year”.

According to the article, “Officer C.H. Fay, while patrolling his beat Friday night about 11:30 o’clock, saw dense smoke issuing from a chimney in the Chapman Block on Canal Street. Smoke was also issuing from the roof, and the officer said that he could even hear the tin on the roof crackle from the heat. He hastened down High Street, notified Officer Brown to go to the building, and then rang the alarm in the fire engine house on Union Street.”

A month later, according to the January 5th, 1899 edition of the Westerly Narragansett Weekly, the next regular monthly meeting of the Westerly Town Council included accepting a monthly report from the Chief of Police. This report indicated “1 store secured, 1 liquor raid made, and 12 arrests.”

During the January meeting, Police Constables Coon, Crandall, West, and Brown were re-appointed for the months of January, February, and March.

Among the monthly bills that were ordered paid during the meeting were to Police Chief E.W. Coon in the amount of \$70.00, as well as to Police Constables

J.B. Crandall, E.W. West, T.E. Brown, and C.H. Fay in the amount of \$60.00, and to Police Constable Clark Davis in the amount of \$24.50.

The website www.officialdata.org notes that “\$1 in 1899 is equivalent in purchasing power to about \$36.37 today, an increase of \$35.37 over 125 years.” As a result, the bills paid to the police in 1899 would be relatively equivalent to a monthly salary of \$2,545.60 and a yearly salary of \$30,547.20 for the Police Chief and a monthly salary of \$2,181.95 and a yearly salary of \$26,183.40 for the Police Constables.

Interestingly, the monthly salaries had increased by approximately twenty percent in the preceding twenty-five years. According to “Westerly’s Gold... Her People” by Thomas O’Connell, the first police constables appointed when the Police Department was formed in 1873 were paid \$50 per month (\$600 per year) and the first police chief was paid \$60 per month (\$720 per year).



Pictured is one of the Police Constables assigned to the Watch Hill area. The photo is not dated but the officer appears to be wearing the special uniform pants, boots, and gloves that were often worn by officers assigned to patrol on motorcycles.

**WESTERLY HISTORICAL
SOCIETY
&
BABCOCK-SMITH HOUSE
MUSEUM
COLLABORATION**



The Westerly Historical Society was founded in the parlor of the Babcock-Smith House in 1913. After the passing of Julia Smith in 1924, the Society moved to various loaned spaces in the Westerly Library, but as the library expanded it became increasingly difficult to find space for the Society. As a result, the Society could not accept, store, and maintain many of the artifacts that were being offered to the organization.

When the Babcock-Smith House Museum completed the Carriage House addition in 2015, they built an expanded vault and offered the original vault as well as additional storage and workspace to the Society.

This physical closeness has led to many benefits for both organizations. The overlap of people who are members of both organizations leads to a very cordial and comfortable working relationship while jointly sponsored events make each organization stronger.

As a direct result of the generosity of the Board and Members of the Babcock-Smith House Museum, the Westerly Historical Society has been able to grow its collections exponentially including the acquisition of the massive Dwight C. Brown collection.

The Board and Members of the Westerly Historical Society sincerely appreciate the guidance, generosity, and support of the Babcock-Smith House Museum.

THANK YOU!!!

Announcements

It's Time to Renew Your Membership!
We have mailed the renewal information and return envelopes to all current members.

WHS Membership Renewal Levels

Individual	\$25.00	
Family	\$50.00	
Patron	\$100.00	
Benefactor	\$250.00+	Samuel Ward Level
Corporate	\$500.00+	Silas Greenman Level

Dear members, October is Westerly Historical Society renewal month. Membership is our primary source of income. With your support we continue our mission to research, study, and preserve the local history in our community. We do this with programs, contests and awards. We do this by supporting other researchers, students and businesses looking to learn more about our town's storied history.

This year we changed a few options for membership and added a new corporate category for those local businesses large and small to have their own distinction. As we always do, we continue to encourage our membership to look for our sponsors while shopping and please make sure you support those who support us.

If you represent a local business or corporation in our area, please consider our new corporate membership level and we will do our part to let everyone know you are our champions!

Look for your renewal forms in the mail and keep in mind that memberships make nice gifts to friends, family, neighbors and coworkers!

Thank you for your continued support of the Westerly Historical Society!

Sincerely, Tom

If you do not receive a renewal invitation, you may renew online at www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org.

Or you may renew by mail by simply mailing a check payable to Westerly Historical Society to the following address; PO Box 91, Westerly, RI 02891. Please include your name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number.

New Additions to Our Archives

The following historical artifacts have been donated recently to further expand the historical collections of the Westerly Historical Society.



Another recent donation to our expanding historical archives is this zippered money bag that was used by the Westerly Sun Newspaper carriers. These orange money bags were provided to the young newspaper carriers to collect and store their weekly payments as well as their tips. They were made of a heavy canvas material and were about 6 inches wide by 8 inches high. The bags had two loops on the back that were used to fasten the bag to their belts. This particular money bag was used in the late seventies on a newspaper route in Bradford.

It was donated to the archives this year by Andy Peacock.



Also included in our photo archives are these photos from the fifties of the young newspaper carriers who completed a bicycle safety course taught by Westerly Police Patrol Officer Bob Kessel. Pictured are local youths including John Livingston, David Dower, Harold Beal, Marshall Stowell, Abe Magni, Ted Dionne, Leo Dotolo, Elizabeth Plateau, Mary Quinland, Bill Delaney, and Herb Dobson.

If you are interested in obtaining additional information or arranging for a donation of a Westerly related historical item to our expanding collections, please email our President, Thomas Gulluscio, at whspresident@gmail.com or our Archivist, Zachary Garceau, at whsarchivist@gmail.com

Discovering Westerly Cemeteries

Westerly Cemetery # 029 - The Captain Cornelius Stetson Lot

There were reportedly six burials in this cemetery with four marked by fieldstones and two marked by small marble headstones and footstones. Only two of the burials are recorded. The most recent known burial was in 1819 and the oldest known burial is not recorded.

Included are the remains of Captain Cornelius Stetson who was born in 1751 and passed on April 12th of 1819 along with his wife, Susan Stetson whose birth and death dates are not recorded.

Captain Stetson served in the Revolutionary war. The inscription on his flat-topped marble headstone is partially unreadable but appears to include his name, his death date, and his age. The inscription on his footstone simply reads "Stetson". The headstone is now eighteen inches above the ground and thirteen inches wide. A bronze marker indicating "Veteran - Wars of the United States" also marks the burial site since 1992.

In 1992, the missing headstone and footstone of Captain Stetson were found using a probe. The stones had sunken below the surface and were found approximately six inches underground. The headstone was dug up and reset to a height of 22 inches above ground and the footstone was dug up and reset to a height of eight inches above the ground. Unfortunately, the reportedly broken headstone and footstone of his wife could not be found.

In 2023, a visit confirmed that the headstone had already sunken more than four inches in the past 30 years and was now less than 18 inches above ground.

According to the 1868 book by Frederic Denison, "Westerly and Its Witnesses", the cemetery was recorded in the 1860's as being "in the northwestern section of the town, on the lands of Samuel Peckham, Esq., east of the road leading into Charlestown, in the northeastern corner of an orchard lot, without enclosure, and densely covered with vines and bushes are a few graves, some having broken headstones."

At that time, he noted that "we can only read from two; Capt. Cornelius Stetson, died April 12, 1819, in his 69th year" and "Mrs. Susan Stetson. (This stone is sadly broken.)"

The cemetery is located on the right side of Laudone Drive approximately three hundred feet in from Church Street about halfway between pole number 2 and pole number 3 and is diagonally across the street from Westerly Cemetery number 28. The cemetery is approximately twenty feet in from the road in the corner of a field marked by broken stone walls.

For those using GPS, the cemetery is located at 41 Degrees, 23 minutes, and 43.2 seconds North by 71 degrees, 44 minutes, and 16.6 seconds West.

In addition to a personal visit to the cemetery, information for this article was obtained from and sincere appreciation is extended to the research of Reverend Denison in the 1860's, the files of the Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries Commission, the personal knowledge of Cemeteries Commissioner Larry Hunter, and information from the current owner of the property, Salvatore Saporita.



Included in the cemetery are the remains of Revolutionary War Captain Cornelius Stetson who was born in 1751 and passed on April 12th of 1819.

The stone reads "Captain Cornelius Stetson, died April 12, 1819, in his 69th year".



*Cemetery of
Revolutionary
War Captain
Cornelius
Stetson*

Born in 1751

Passed in 1819

69 Years Old



Included in the cemetery are the remains of Revolutionary War Captain Cornelius Stetson who was born in 1751 and passed on April 12th of 1819. His footstone can be seen poking out of the ground behind the headstone in the pictures on the upper left and a close up of the footstone in the picture on the lower right reveals the carved name "Stetson".



The cemetery is located on the right side of Laudone Drive approximately three hundred feet in from Church Street about halfway between pole number 2 and pole number 3 and is diagonally across the street from Westerly Cemetery number 28. The cemetery is approximately twenty feet in from the road in the corner of a field marked by broken stone walls.

THOSE PESKY PIES!!! By Thomas A. O'Connell

The following excerpts are the second part of a four part series that will review the strange and twisted case of the poison pie epidemic which swept through Westerly and Pawcatuck in 1915. It was originally written by Westerly Historical Society member Thomas O'Connell for one of his books. The article is shared here with his permission.

Down in the beach areas more cases of the illness were reported. Dr. Michael Henry Scanlon of 45 High Street was contacted to treat Alexander Gavitt, the restaurant's proprietor. Dr. Scanlon then dashed back to town, stopping at The Ninigret at 6 Canal Street to examine Raymond Arrant, the chauffeur to T.J. Crane of Philadelphia. After the doctor's pronouncement of ptomaine poisoning and assigning the bed rest which recovery from the illness required, Mr. Crane had a private duty nurse attend to Mr. Arrant for the duration. While in town Dr. Scanlon examined and diagnosed Mrs. Morgan of 138 Main Street as another ptomaine poisoning victim.

In Pleasant View [Misquamicut] Mr. and Mrs. J. Harold Thorpe, Capt. Wilcox's chauffeur, and their five-year-old daughter were similarly afflicted. Nearby at Watch Hill, Samuel Mills, a guest at the Colonial House was stricken with the malady, as was Gilbert Sisson of Avondale. Quonochontaug residents Emery Hodge and Captain Elias F. Wilcox both felt extreme discomfort. Dr. Edwin R. Lewis of 95 High Street was consulted by both Mills and Sisson.

Some of those affected in Westerly proper were Mrs. Laura M. Carney and Miss Rose Carney of Spring Street; Donald L. Ferguson, a policeman, of Highland Avenue; Ralph Spargo of 55 School Street; and John "Doc" Sawyers, a well-known local baseball pitcher, of Tower Street. They were attended by Dr. Francis C. Pagan of 9 Grove Avenue. Samuel Royster, of Main and Cross Streets; Harold Dean, of Friendship Street; Michael D. Perry, of Pleasant Street, who worked at the Star Fish Market at 58 W. Broad Street, Miss Effie

means, of High Street; George W. Ainsworth, of Potter Hill; John Murphy of Providence, a clerk at Bannon's Drug Store on Main Street; Chester Burdick, of Chase Hill; Michael Gactrone, of Bradford; and, John Bennett, of Railroad Avenue, who visited his brother-in-law, Captain Elias F. Wilcox, and ate some pie there.

Connecticut diners at Gavitt's Restaurant too were afflicted...It was reported that on Sunday, July 4, Mr. & Mrs. Francis T. Brightman had late morning meals there. Probably they made it their Sunday morning event for years. Mr. Brightman, 71, a Civil War [1861-1865] veteran, downed some ham and eggs, possibly with some toast and coffee. He topped the meal off with a generous slice of cocoanut custard pie. Mrs. Brightman, 68, feasted on lamb and peas, a glass of ice-cold water, and for dessert a portion of cocoanut custard pie. The couple returned to their Stonington Road home to relax. Their serenity was stolen from them by incipient feelings of intestinal distress. By 5 p.m. they had had enough. They phoned Dr. Herman C. Little, a Stonington physician, to make a house call right away.

Dr. Little was alarmed by the elderly couple's condition. Both patients were violently nauseated. But, he was a bit puzzled by symptoms. Though he sensed the problem's origin correctly, he made a call to a colleague, Dr. John N. Lewis of Ashaway, to consult with him. Given the severity of the symptoms and the patients' ages, the medical men decided that there was no remedy for Brightman's situation. The Brightman couple's health deteriorated rapidly until Thursday, July 8, their frail bodies could combat the illness no longer. They died that afternoon within ten minutes of each other. The husband was the first. Their deaths would bring the early toll to three.

On the same Stonington Road, Mrs. Belle Bridgeman was laid low with ptomaine poisoning. Other poisoning victims were Mrs. Mary J. Clark of 114 Mechanic Street and her two daughters, Mary and Rose; William Gallagher, Pawcatuck; and, Alvin W. Mawson, a Stonington High School pitcher, who sought the aid of Dr. Frank I. Payne of 38 Granite Street.

(Continued on next page)

THOSE PESKY PIES!!! By Thomas A. O'Connell – Part 2 (Continued)

Other cases of Gavitt's Restaurant's poison pie epidemic fanned out across the Nutmeg State from North Stonington to Lebanon to Manchester, and Hartford.

The cocoonut custard pies were also blamed food poisoning bouts in Wakefield, RI. After an automobile journey from that town Walter M. Westlake and Miss Edith Champlin of Point Judith joined Charles H. Hall, a former Westerly Town Councilman, and his spouse for dinner at Gavitt's eatery. Westlake and Champlin allegedly both became violently ill after ingesting slices of lemon pie. They were treated by Dr. Rowland D. Robinson of Wakefield. The couple eventually recovered in full.

Not so fortunate was Horace Rodman, 60, of West Street, Ashaway. Though he was initially reported as recovering from ptomaine poisoning, Rodman succumbed to his illness on July 21, 1915.

The poison pie epidemic, as it named, began on Saturday, July 3, when certain customers began consuming Gavitt's pies, a weekend custom for many local residents. The *Westerly Sun* was not made aware of the situation until early on Tuesday, July 6. Word of the calamity spread to the local paper through the information given by Dr. John L. May who had been called to attend the Sullivan and Savage cases on Monday. It was he who reported, "that Mr. Sullivan died at noon" on July 6. The *Sun* assigned the story to one of its best reporters, Herbert P. Clark, who worked tirelessly for several days to search out victims' names and addresses, the food they had consumed, where, and so on.

At this crucial time, early in the first week of the crisis, the townspeople in Stonington and Westerly were on Gavitt's side. There was "a wide feeling of sympathy for Mr. Gavitt, the proprietor of the restaurant from which the trouble is said to have originated, and it is doubtful if anyone holds him directly responsible for what has happened."

That is not to say that the general public was not aroused and fearful for their health as would be normal in such a quandary. Public health officials in both afflicted states launched investigations the very day the unwanted news appeared in the local paper.

The Rhode Island inquiries were done in a manner which sought out physical evidence that might indicate how and where and why the epidemic might have begun. It was a hands-on investigation. Connecticut officials rather than cover almost the same ground as their interstate brethren, held hearings to collect the testimony of those persons affected by the poison pies.

After receiving reports from other town doctors with patients having similar symptoms (terrible stomach pains, violent vomiting, and severe dehydration), Dr. Scanlon, who was also Westerly's Medical Examiner, contacted the Rhode Island State Pure Food and Drug Commission at the capitol. On July 7, that agency dispatched two of its members to Westerly to conduct preliminary groundwork. Frank A. Jackson, and Franklin E. Strickland, the State Chemist, went right to work. Together with Dr. Scanlon they immediately visited the Gavitt eating place to make an inspection of the premises and to collect evidence. They sent food samples to their Providence lab.

The foodstuffs they gathered included items used in the production of the offending pies: milk, eggs, flour, shredded cocoonut, nutmeg, granulated and powdered sugars, and a lard compound [shortening] used to make the crust. The trio also seized some liquid and powdered insect killers kept in the kitchen. And, too, a whole pie was secured from the Pleasant View area for testing purposes.

The lard had particularly aroused the suspicions of Doctors Scanlon, May, and Henry L. Johnson of 21 Grove Avenue as they had recalled some diners who consumed both the pie and the crust became ill, while others who ate only the filler were unaffected.


Further official involvement on Tuesday came in the form of a directive from the Rhode Island Attorney, General Herbert A. Rice, to Dr. Scanlon that he immediately perform an autopsy on the deceased Timothy Sullivan.

Stay Tuned to read part 3 of this series in next month's Newsletter as we learn more about the story of the "Westerly Poison Pie Epidemic".

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