



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

November 2023

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Program Notes

The Westerly Historical Society, in conjunction with the Richmond Historical Society and the Friends of the Quonochontaug Grange will present an informative historical program this month titled **The Criminals of Westerly and Richmond**. The forty-five minute program will include a wide variety of fascinating stories of the crimes, the criminals, and the punishments that were very common in our area in the twentieth century.

The presentation will be held on Saturday, November 11th, from 2 PM to 3 PM at the Babcock-Smith House Museum Carriage House located at 124 Granite Street in Westerly.

The speaker will be local author Kelly Sullivan. She is the author of several books and hundreds of historical newspaper columns. Her books include "Hidden History of South County" and "Murder & Mayhem in Washington County"

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SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 11TH

2 PM TO 3 PM

BABCOCK SMITH MUSEUM

CARRIAGE HOUSE

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FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

REFRESHMENTS PROVIDED

ALL ARE WELCOME TO JOIN US!



WESTERLY'S WITNESS

Published by the Westerly Historical Society
P. O. Box 91, Westerly, RI 02891, seven times per
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,

Here we are, the first week of November with Fall in
no particular hurry to get here. Unlike our very loyal
members who have been graciously hopping on their
membership renewal forms and speedily returning
them to us. Thank you for being so considerate and so
supportive!

Your dues are always appreciated and they are already
at work for your society with scheduled programs and
long overdue upgrades to our software and archival
programs.

We are now embarking on a new way of preserving
Westerly's history. A series of oral histories to capture
first hand accounts of Westerly's storied history from
the folks who have had a lifelong front row seat to
everything that made Westerly's history.

We know this history will be presented with both
favorable and unfavorable perspectives of events
through time. If you or someone you know qualifies
for this series, please let us know so we can consider
you for this project.

I wouldn't be doing my job if I failed to mention that
our memberships make great holiday gifts to friends
and family near and far! Just log in to our website and
download an application or two.

Happy Thanksgiving to you all! I wish you all a
peaceful and reflective holiday to embrace all that is
dear to us, family and friends!

Tom

EDITOR'S NOTES

*We would like to sincerely thank our two
newest newsletter sponsors. Please welcome
SERVPRO OF WASHINGTON COUNTY
and MICHELLE'S SCHOOL OF DANCE!
They join our other two long term generous
sponsors, GREY SAIL BREWING and THE
WINE STORE! We encourage our readers
to patronize and support these fine Westerly
businesses who generously contribute to the
community and who support us in our
efforts to bring you this newsletter.*

We sincerely appreciate their support!!!

As noted in the last few issues, we have
increased number of pages and the number
of photos as well as the amount of 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 for this month is

WHS202311

Westerly Police - Crime and Punishment – 125 Years Ago

By Robert Peacock

As the Town of Westerly recognizes this year to be the 150th Anniversary of the formal 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 view a snapshot in time of what type of crime was occurring and what type of punishment was being issued.

According to the September 22, 1898 edition of the Westerly Narragansett Weekly, there were three local court cases of note in the prior week. The primary headline read “Three Court Cases” and the secondary headline read “Pierce Street Italians Pay Fines in District Court”.

The paper reported that “The District Court met on Monday morning, in the police rooms in the basement of the Town Hall.” (Note – this would be the “old” Town Hall with the clock tower across the street from the “new” current Town Hall. On this Monday, the paper reported that the proceedings were held “amid the litter and refuse caused by the repairs to the cells in the lockup.”

Louis Moranno of Pierce Street was charged with disorderly conduct resulting from his actions of “following a man who owed him money, and after threatened to whip him”. Mr. Moranno “pleaded guilty, and was fined \$1 and costs, which amounted to \$4.60.” The court costs of \$3.60 was three times the actual fine.

John Moranno, apparently also of Pierce Street, was arraigned on a similar charge. “He also pleaded guilty and was given the same fine.” The paper reported that “Louis Moranno gave the judge \$9.20, and the men were allowed to go”.

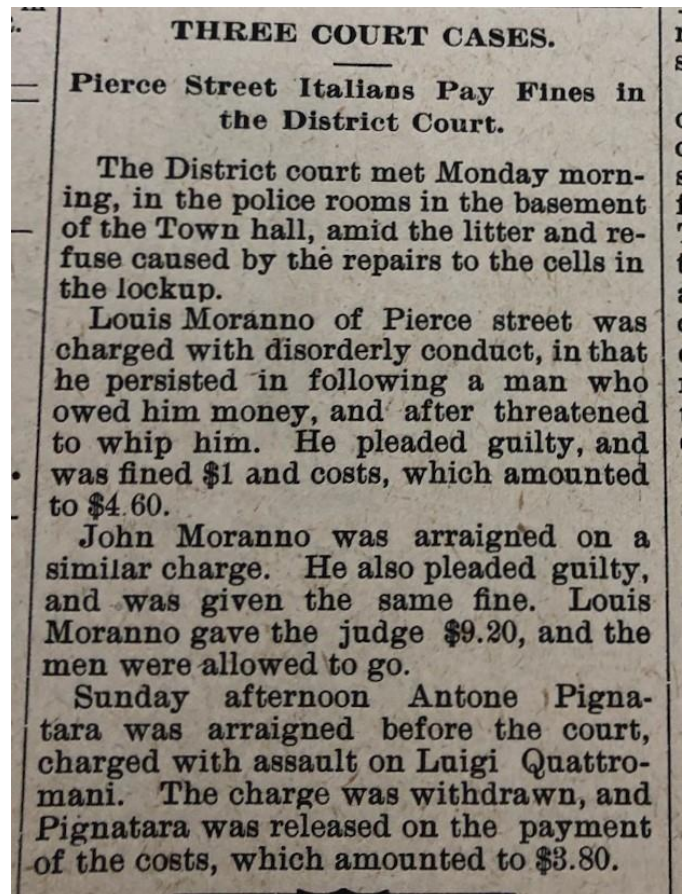
The paper also reported that on Sunday afternoon, Antone Pignataro, presumably another Italian of Pierce Street was arraigned before the court, charged with assault on Luigi Quattromani. The charge was withdrawn, and Pignataro was released on the payment of the costs, which amounted to \$3.80.”

Whether the cases were related, and whether Luigi Quattromani was the subject of the owed money and whipping threats by the Moranno’s is not known.

The fact that the disorderly conduct fines were \$1 while the court costs were three times the actual fine amount is interesting. For financial comparison purposes, the Westerly Narragansett Weekly, published every Thursday, cost \$1.50 per year in 1898 and was payable in advance.

The website www.officialdata.org notes that “\$1 in 1898 is equivalent in purchasing power to about \$36.37 today, an increase of \$35.37 over 125 years.” As a result, the fines paid by these men in 1898 would be relatively equal to a fine today of \$167.30 for each of the Moranno’s and \$138.20 for Pignataro. The subscription to the weekly newspaper would be equal to \$54.55 per year in today’s dollars.

According to recent Westerly Police court records, while the crime of disorderly conduct can result in a fine of up to \$500 dollars plus court costs, the average fine is usually much less and is often in the form of a contribution to the Victims Crime Indemnity Fund and the standard court costs are \$96.75 in 2023.



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Announcements

REMINDER

It's Time to Renew Your Membership!
*We have mailed the renewal information with
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

Membership is our primary source of income to fund the many initiatives of the organization. With your support we can continue our mission to research, study, and preserve the history in our community. We do this with programs, contests, and awards while we also do this by supporting other researchers, students, and businesses as they research 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 support those who support us.

Your renewal forms should have arrived in the mail. If not, please email WHSMembership@gmail.com

Please 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!**

HOLIDAY BOUTIQUE NOTICE

The members of the Babcock-Smith House Museum invite you to join them at their Holiday Open House on Saturday, December 9th, from 9 AM to Noon at 124 Granite Street in Westerly.

*Purchase Their Very Popular Cookie Platters!
Buy Their Delicious Homemade Biscotti!
Visit Joshua's Store for Unique Gifts!
Play The Gift Certificate Raffle!
Enjoy Free Hot Cider, Muffins, and Soup!
Expand Your Knowledge With Free Museum Tours!*

New Additions to Our Archives

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

As always, we sincerely appreciated any and all Westerly related donations!



Additional recent donations to our continually expanding historical archives includes a Westerly Town Sergeant badge, a porcelain police whistle, and a Rhode Island Registry of Motor Vehicles Investigator badge. They were donated by Eleanor Cote and belonged to her father, Michael “Mickey” Murano.



Mickey Murano was well known in Westerly. He was born in 1910 and passed away in 1990 at the age of eighty. He worked for the Town of Westerly in a variety of capacities including laborer, bus mechanic, transportation coordinator, electrician, and electrical inspector. He also worked part time as a Westerly Town Sergeant, as a Westerly Police Constable, and as a Rhode Island DMV Investigator in the 1940s's and 1950's.

As the Town Sergeant, he provided security at regular and special Town Council meetings as well during all Probate Court sessions.

As a Westerly Police Constable, he worked a regular security detail on weekends at the Westerly Drive In.

As a DMV Investigator, he staffed the satellite office of the Rhode Island Department of Motor Vehicles that was located in the basement of Town Hall.

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

Discovering Westerly's Cemeteries

Westerly Cemetery # 003 - The Champlin Wilcox Lot

There were reportedly 40 burials in this cemetery with 17 marked by fieldstones and 23 marked by carved headstones. The most recent known burial was in 1877 and the oldest known burial was in 1715.

The cemetery is approximately ninety feet by one hundred sixty feet and is surrounded by a stone wall of large stones. Records of the Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries Commission identify 24 of the people buried here including ten members of the Wilcox family, nine members of the Gavitt family, three members of the Fenner family, one member of the Champlin family, and one member of the Vars family.

The oldest grave is of William Champlin who was born in 1654 and passed on December 1st of 1715. Amazingly, his grave marker remains almost completely legible. The small slate marker is very intricately carved with several obscure circular designs as well as what appears to be a skull with wings. The inscription appears to read 'Here Lyeth the body of William Champlin who died in the 62d year of his age Dec 1st 1715'.

According to the 1868 book by Frederic Denison, "Westerly and Its Witnesses", the cemetery was recorded in 1860's as being "situated on the ancient Wilcox farm, on the south side of the shore road, by the roadside. It is quite a large burying place, well enclosed by walls, and kept in good order in comparison with most grounds of this sort. Numerous grave are found here, many of them without inscriptions."

At the time when Denison visited the area in the early 1860's and the book was printed in 1869, Denison had listed seventeen burial inscriptions. The files of the Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries Commission reveal and identify seven additional burials that occurred after his visit.

The cemetery is located approximately fifteen feet from Shore Road on the Pond and Ocean side, in the same stone wall enclosure as Westerly Cemetery #074 and in the area of 249 Shore Road. Access is relatively easy from the road through the light brush and trees with the exception of the first few steps taken by the road through the break in the stone wall. The stones are uneven and there is a slight decline on the back side of the wall which makes it a bit difficult and requires holding on to the post of the #003 cemetery sign.

For those using GPS, the cemetery is located at 41 Degrees, 20 minutes, and 27.5 seconds North by 71 degrees, 46 minutes, and 51.3 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, and the personal knowledge of Cemeteries Commissioner Larry Hunter.



Many of the markers are only partially readable and worn down by the ravages of time and weather.



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Amazingly, his grave marker remains almost completely legible. The small slate marker is very intricately carved with several obscure circular designs as well as what appears to be a skull with wings. The inscription appears to read 'Here Lyeth the body of William Champlin who died in the 62d year of his age Dec 1st 1715'



*Upper Left marker reads **OUR FATHER** at the top and **BLESSED ARE THE DEAD WHO DIE IN THE LORD** on the bottom with information including Hannah L. Vars, Wife of Charles Vars, Daughter of Oliver Wilcox, Esq. Died Sept 27 1876, Aged 60 years and 1 month. Upper Right marker is partially illegible but appears to read in part **In memory of Sarah, wife of Stephen Wilcox, who died March 16, 1893 Aged 36 Years.***



*Upper Left marker reads **“SACRED to the memory of GEORGE W. WILCOX who died July 25, 1864 Aged 52 years The right pious hath hope in his death”**. Upper Right marker reads **SACRED to the memory of MARY WILCOX who died Feb 8, 1868 Aged 67 years Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God”**.*



There were reportedly 40 burials in this cemetery with 17 marked by fieldstones. In the Upper Left photo, one fieldstone is visible in the center while two others are barely above the surface and are covered by leaves and vegetation. In the Upper Right photo, three fieldstones are visible in a relatively straight line with two in the center of the photo sunken and completely covered by leaves and debris. Several other fieldstones are scattered throughout the cemetery but most have sunken and are barely visible.



Access is relatively easy from Shore Road through the light brush and trees with the exception of the first few steps taken by the road through the break in the stone wall. The stones are uneven and there is a slight decline on the back side of the wall which makes it a bit difficult and requires holding on to the post of the #003 cemetery sign. Use caution!

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

The following excerpts are the third 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.

By the afternoon of July 7, Westerly's Medical Examiner had assembled more information about the ptomaine poisoning cases from additional members of the Westerly medical community: Dr. Samuel C. Webster of 99 High Street; Dr. John Champlin of 9 Granite Street; and Dr. Asa B. Briggs and his son, Dr. Asa S. Briggs of Ashaway. Since 1902, when Dr. John Champlin had founded the Westerly Automatic Telephone Company, lines of communication between doctors were enormously strengthened. All had private practices in various sections of the town. Their telephone lines were assumed to be for the most part private but often were party lines with multiple users who may or may not have listened in on their neighbors and spread inflammatory gossip and rumors about the spreading epidemic.

At 10:30 p.m. that night, Dr. Scanlon convened members of the medical community at the funeral parlor of Joseph T. Murphy of 26 Canal Street to probe for cause(s) of Timothy Sullivan's death. Perhaps sensing that Mr. Sullivan's dissection procedure might prove both illuminating and instructional, Dr. Scanlon invited 9 local doctors recently involved in the treatment of ptomaine poisoning patients to observe. Some physicians' names not already listed, but who attended were Dr. C. Grant Savage of 7 Elm Street, Dr. William A. Hillard of 137 West Broad Street, Dr. R.B. Smith of 90 High Street, and Dr. Charles P. Crandall of 30 Canal Street.

Mr. Sullivan's intestines yielded up a green fluid, perplexing the assembled doctors craning over each other's scapulas for a peek. Dr. Scanlon forwarded several vials of the vile liquid on to Mr. Strickland's laboratory for analysis.

The next day, Wednesday, July 8, witnessed the consecutive deaths of the Brightman couple in Stonington, Ct. The dolorous event triggered an official reaction from that state's medical officialdom. Even though family members had told Funeral Director Charles H. Gavitt not to embalm their parents' bodies as there might be an autopsy performed on them, New London County Coroner Franklin H. Brown of Norwich decided that the results of Sullivan's autopsy would probably satisfy a need for physical evidence in the Brightmans' cases.

Not thrilled with the progress being made in the investigation of his parents' apparent food poisoning-related deaths, Henry M. Brightman of Edgewater, New York, decided to call in a "food expert," A.W. McCann, a writer for the *New York Globe*. In the absence of a report from R.I. Chemist Strickland, yet based on the suspicions of several local doctors that the shortening contained in a tub labeled "Guaranteed under the Pure Food and Drug Act, June 30, 1906, Serial #31131" was considered **the** ingredient which caused their demise, Henry Brightman intuited that he was on to something important, possibly incriminating. If the shortening mixed with the flour to make the pie crust could be proven by a food expert as the cause of death, why then he might "hold the manufacturers of the preparation liable."

On Friday, July 9, Connecticut health officials stepped up their efforts to get to the cause of the problem. Coroner Franklin Brown, too, visited the Gavitt restaurant. He carefully scrutinized the premises and departed with samples of various ingredients mixed in the pies' production. These exhibits he forwarded to Professor Frank P. Underhill at Yale University's physiological chemical laboratory in New Haven to be examined for evidence of the presence of ptomaine poisons. New London County Medical Examiner George D. Stanton, after assessing the situation, indicated that he was pleased with Brown's work thus far.

Not pleased was Henry Brightman who went to the Stonington authorities on Monday, July 12 to "demand a thorough investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of his parents."

(Continued on next page)

THOSE PESKY PIES!!! By Thomas A. O'Connell – Part 3 (Continued)

Stonington officials told Brightman that the town's Prosecuting Attorney, Benjamin Hewitt, would conduct the inquiry. Three Justices of the Peace sitting in the Stonington Borough Court Room would hear the case. Between 30 to 40 witnesses would be summoned to testify.

The next day in Rhode Island the call for an investigation reached the halls of Congress. U.S. Representative George F. O'Shaunessy (1910-1916), a Democrat, fired off a letter to the United States Public Health Service requesting federal assistance because they would be more effective than local officials.

As he wrote it, "in view of the fact that the cause of the epidemic arose in the state of Connecticut and the sickness and death happened in Rhode Island, the matter is in a sense in the nature of an interstate affair and an investigation of the causes and effects of this epidemic can be dealt with in a better way by the federal officials than by state officials."

Within a day, the Surgeon General of the U.S. Public Health Service, Rupert Blue, dispatched Dr. C. H. Lavinder from his post at Ellis Island "to obtain information and the history of the poisoning epidemic for the federal officials at Washington."

One interesting aspect resulting from Lavinder's stop in R.I. was that Franklin Strickland announced that soon he would be making a report on his analysis of the food items removed from Gavitt's establishment.

Of even greater importance at a later time would be Strickland's comment about handing over to Dr. Harry S. Bernstein, the State Bacteriologist, some of those food samples recovered during his visit to Westerly.

While not yet official, it was learned "that bacteria had been found in certain of the materials examined by" Bernstein. Proof of the toxicity of the bacteria found in those materials was that two guinea pigs inoculated with the stuff "died in a few hours."

Meanwhile, the Stonington hearings had commenced.

The first group of witnesses was the doctors, who described the cases they had treated, the symptoms observed, the food ingested (cocoanut custard pie), and the result (ptomaine poisoning) each patient experienced.

Pie eaters were the next to offer their evidence. Mrs. William P. Wells of Old Mystic suffered no ill effects from eating one of Gavitt's chocolate pies, but her daughters, Stella and Carrie, who partook of the cocoanut custard pie, had been ill for a while. Other witnesses whose names have already been mentioned as pie-poisoning victims told their tales of illness and distress.

When Henry Brightman took the stand, he repeated his story about delaying the embalming of his father's body. "I was perfectly willing for an autopsy provided it had been performed before Friday noon," he declared. Brightman was probably correct to have insisted on an autopsy because not every death is the same. Such assumptions can often lead to errors in judgment. There might have been other reasons besides ptomaine poisoning and old age for his parents' deaths.

Holding his own *ad hoc* investigation, Brightman really nettled the Gavitt's staff, he testified. He had paid an impromptu visit there Wednesday (July 7) afternoon after 5 p.m. When he entered the kitchen, he found the dishwasher "lying on a table and that his pants were in contact with certain [food] articles." The waitress awakened him. The witness continued that the waitress later told him the articles brushed by the dishwasher's clothing had been discarded. [Did the staff know the implications of their act?].


His next visit on Friday, he argued with Mr. Gavitt. That was when he observed a **No Admittance** sign on the kitchen door.

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

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