



# Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

January 2024

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## Program Notes

The Westerly Historical Society would like to extend our appreciation to Kelly Sullivan for her entertaining and informative historical program titled *Criminals of Westerly and Richmond*. The program included a variety of fascinating stories of the crimes, criminals, and punishments that were very common in our area in the twentieth century.

Kelly is the author of several books and hundreds of historical newspaper columns. Her books include *“Hidden History of South County”*, *“Murder & Mayhem in Washington County”*, and *“History, Mystery, and Lore of Rhode Island”*.

Her entertaining program was very well received with forty-nine guests joining us!

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The Westerly Historical Society would like to extend our appreciation to Joseph Coduri for his informative historical program with a focus on the history of the local Fire Departments.

Joe is the author of two other books, *“Rhode Island Railroad Stations; Post Card Views of the Turn of the Century”* and *“Rhode Island Town and Villages; Post Card Views of the Turn of the Century”*

His informative program was very well received with twenty-seven guests joining us!

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***The Executive Board of the  
Westerly Historical Society  
would like to wish all of our  
members a very happy, safe,  
and prosperous New Year!***



# WESTERLY'S WITNESS

**Published by the Westerly Historical Society**  
P. O. Box 91, Westerly, RI 02891, published eight times per year in January, February, March, April, May, 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.*

Happy New Year WHS friends!

With an exciting and productive 2023 behind us, I am honored we had the opportunity to accomplish all that we have provided for our membership. We offered some of the best programs we have ever produced with deep appreciation to our program officers.

We added several faces to the Executive Board while saying goodbye to several long serving and valued board members. Our programming included our first co-sponsored event in Watch Hill with our friends at the Watch Hill Conservancy, speaker Jack Spratt, and event sponsor Grey Sail. Look for a return to this venue with our friends in the Summer of 2024!

I would like to encourage our members to help us to continue moving forward into the new year and get your membership renewed as soon as possible so you do not miss any of the wonderful perks of being a member such as Westerly's Witness, our newsletter and notice of our programming and special events.

We are working on a full agenda in 2024 with various programs and events and a series of oral histories by lifelong Westerly residents who had a front row seat for the making of Westerly's history. We will also host a joint "After Hours" Chamber of Commerce event with our friends from the Babcock-Smith House Museum scheduled for April 10th.

Please remember that the Westerly Historical Society memberships make great gifts for friends and family.

Wishing you all a happy and healthy new year!

Tom

## EDITOR'S NOTES

*We sincerely appreciate all of the kind words and all of the positive comments regarding our efforts to produce our "New and Improved" Newsletter!*

*Thank You For Your Support!*

*As always, this is your newsletter!*

*Please let us know what you think!*

*Please remember to patronize our generous newsletter sponsors including SERVPRO OF WASHINGTON COUNTY, MICHELLE'S SCHOOL OF DANCE, THE WINE STORE, and GREY SAIL BREWING. 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!!!*

# Westerly Fire Department – New Alarm Signaling System

By Robert Peacock

According to the March 9, 1899 edition of the Westerly Narragansett Weekly, a new signaling system to notify Westerly firefighters of an alarm was in the final stages of development. The front page article was headlined “A Fire Alarm System – Chief Himes Has Planned a Simple Method Which Will be Adopted in a Few Days.”

The article reported that John M. Himes, the Chief Engineer of the Westerly Fire Department “spends his leisure moments planning to improve the efficiency of the Westerly Fire Department.” The article opined “That does not mean that he is a faddist, because he relies upon good common sense and long experience in Westerly to guide him in all new moves.”

The article notes that a meeting of the Westerly Fire Department Board of Engineers was held and a “simple but effective” signaling system using the bell on the station house was approved. Previously, the alarm for a fire was simply ringing the bell continuously at the fire station until firefighters arrived. They were then directed to the location of the fire. The bell would be rung by a firefighter, a police officer, or a member of the public.

The Westerly Fire District response area was divided into 8 alarm districts. For example, Box Number 1 would indicate an alarm West by the river, East to Elm and Beach Streets, South to the District line, and North to School Street while Box Number 8 would indicate an alarm West to West Street, Dayton, Street, and Pearl Streets, East to the District Line, North to the District Line, and South to the Railroad Tracks.

The signaling system was described as follows, “When a general quick ring of the bell is followed by one stroke, with a general quick ring and another stroke, with a pause, and this is repeated, all will know that the fire is in the No. 1 district. Two strokes after the general quick ring will locate the fire in the No. 2 district and so on.”

The paper notes that “The plan is very simple” and reports that “Chief Himes has begun at the lower end of the Westerly Fire District and divided by natural sections the whole district”.

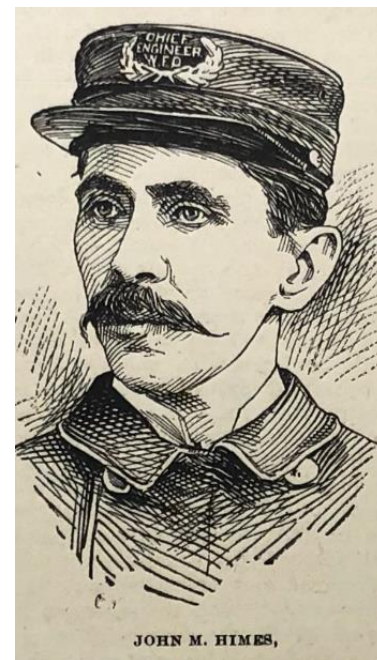
The paper also noted that “In order to give the utmost publicity to the plan..... small pocket cards have been

been printed for distribution by any fireman on either side of the river, ...and large cards have been posted in the rooms of the fire companies and near the bell rope in the fire department building on Union Street.”

The article included a history of the fire service chronology of Chief Himes. He became a firefighter in 1874 when he was elected as a member of the Rhode Island Steam Fire Engine Company on June 2<sup>nd</sup> of 1874. He was then elected Second Assistant Foreman of the company, known as “The Ones”, in 1883 followed by election as Foreman on December 7<sup>th</sup> in 1886. On November 2<sup>nd</sup> of 1891, Himes was elected First Assistant Engineer of the Westerly Fire Department and held the position until November 4<sup>th</sup> of 1895 when he was elected Chief of Department.

The weekly paper reported that “During these 25 years of service Chief Himes has responded to all except 6 calls.” The paper also opined, “He has seen the methods employed at every fire and has a personal knowledge of the location of alley ways and short cuts in the business section. He has risen to the position of Chief because of his manifest ability, experience, and genuine pride in the service”.

A pen and ink style drawing of Chief Himes was included with the newspaper article. Chief Himes appeared to be wearing a fire department style coat and a fire department uniform cap with the words “CHIEF ENGINEER WFD” on the front.



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## **ANNOUNCEMENT**

### **Passing of Past President Benson**

Mr. Robert A. Benson, 84, of George Street in Westerly, died peacefully surrounded by his loving family. He was the beloved husband of Ida Griffin Benson. He was a life-long Rhode Islander and very active member of the Westerly community, serving on the Westerly Library Board, Wilcox Park Committee, Friends of the Westerly Public Library, and Westerly Historical Society.

**Bob was a past president of the Westerly Historical Society and was one of the many members who served the society well for many years and who helped create the foundation of what we are today! May He Rest In Peace!**

## **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 and we do this by supporting other researchers, students, and businesses as they research our town's storied history.

Your renewal forms were mailed in October. If you did not receive it or have misplaced it, please email [WHSMembership@gmail.com](mailto:WHSMembership@gmail.com)

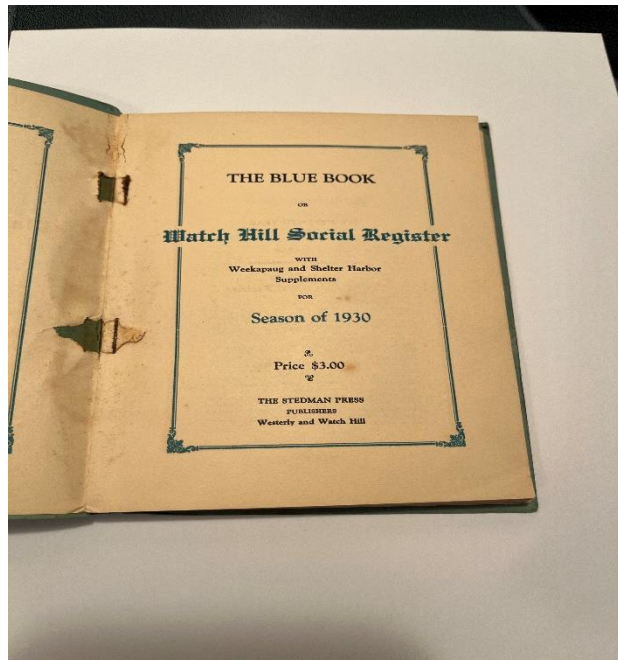
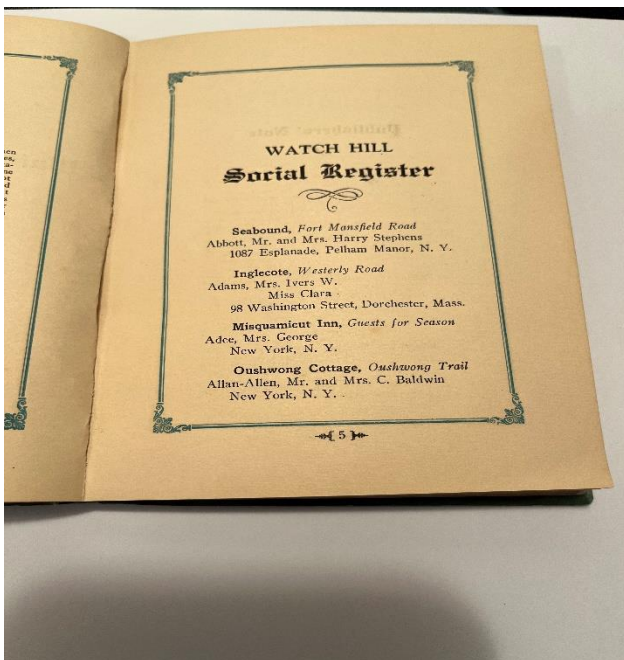
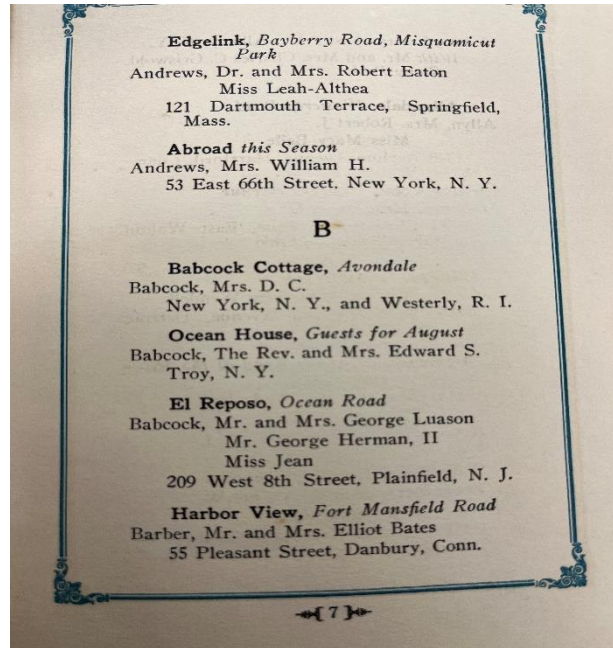
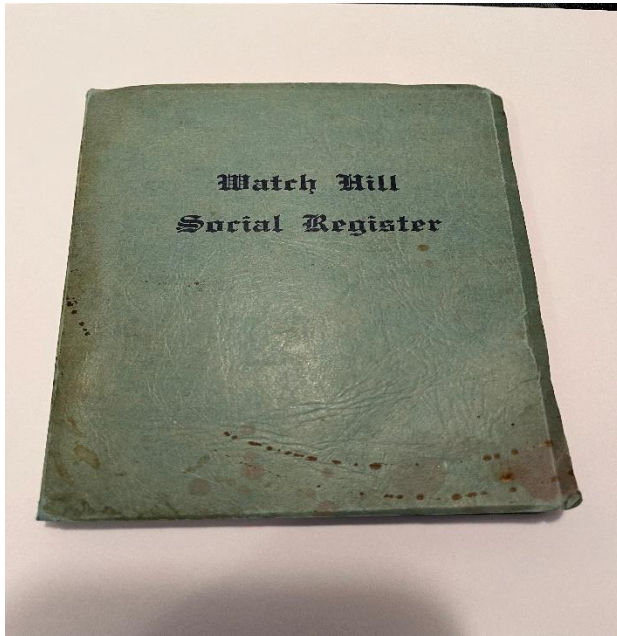
**Please keep in mind that memberships make nice gifts to friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers!**

## New Additions to Our Archives

The following historical artifact was donated recently to further expand the historical collections of the Westerly Historical Society.

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

*Additional recent donations to our continually expanding historical archives includes a 1930 Watch Hill Social Register which lists the majority of the families living there in the summer with their names, addresses, cottage names, and winter addresses. The book was generously donated by Kathleen Connelly and was originally owned by her great grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Heindenis, who were among the original residents of Shelter Harbor in 1898.*



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](mailto:whspresident@gmail.com) or our Archivist, Zachary Garceau, at [whsarchivist@gmail.com](mailto:whsarchivist@gmail.com)

# Discovering Westerly Cemeteries

## Westerly Cemetery # 043 - The Joseph Gavitt Ground

### By Robert Peacock

There were reportedly ten burials in this cemetery which is approximately fifty feet by fifty feet and contains several unmarked fieldstones. The most recent burial was prior to 1868 and the oldest burial is unknown.

Although records do not indicate the burial dates for any of the people interred here, the information documented by Frederic Denison in the 1860's, indicates the remains of the following individuals are buried here: Joseph Gavitt II, and his four children, including two sons and two daughters, Rhoda Gavitt, Oliver Gavitt, Everett Gavitt, and Lydia A. Gavitt.

The Gavitt family property was quite extensive and covered much of the property that is now referred to as Robin Hills. A few descendants of the Gavitt's still own property and live in Robin Hills.

There are at least four visible fieldstone markers scattered throughout the cemetery although most have sunken almost completely into the ground and are now barely visible. However, they can all be seen if you look very closely beneath the fallen leaves. The cemetery is surrounded by old growth trees and the cemetery is covered each fall in a deep layer of leaves.

According to the 1868 book by Frederic Denison, "Westerly and Its Witnesses", the cemetery was recorded in 1860's as being "found on the north of the post road, and west of the residence of the late Joseph Gavitt, 2d, in a meadow owned by the heirs of Mr. G., and without an enclosure. Here are perhaps ten graves. Here lie the remains of Joseph Gavitt, 2d, and his children Rhoda, Oliver, Everett, and Lydia A. Gavitt."

The cemetery is located 225 feet in from the road behind 15 Robin Hollow Lane, at the top of a gently sloping hill, on the corner of the land now belonging to William Peacock. Access can only be gained by crossing private property from Post Road or Robin Hollow Lane.

For those using GPS, the cemetery is located at 41 Degrees, 21 minutes, and 7.9 seconds North by 71 degrees, 45 minutes, and 8.7 seconds West.

*In addition to many personal visits 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 Historic Cemeteries Commissioner Larry Hunter, and the information provided by the current property owner, William Peacock.*





*There were reportedly ten burials in this cemetery marked by fieldstones. Although most have sunken into the ground and are now just barely visible, a few can be seen if you look very carefully and closely.*

*Our recent speaker, Kelly Sullivan, is a local author of several books and hundreds of newspaper columns. Her historical works include a fascinating book of historical short stories titled “History, Mystery, and Lore of Rhode Island”. The following is a summary and synopsis of a story in the book aptly titled “A Devilish Romance – The Tall Stranger”. The story involves two young girls living in Westerly who reportedly unintentionally conjured up the devil while seeking to find husbands.*

Comfort Cottrell and Hannah Maxson were staying in Westerly with Mr. and Mrs. Clarke. The girls were in their early twenties and had been unsuccessful at seeking love and romance. They both had special men in mind but were frustrated and unwilling to let fate bring them together. They decided to try a bit of “magic” or some would say “witchcraft” and create their own fate.

They had heard that dropping a ball of yarn into a well while holding on to the end would cast a love spell on their special men if they simply slowly pulled the yarn out of the well while picturing the two special men and fantasizing of their love and future lives together and quietly chanting a verse from the Bible backwards.

As soon as they had completed the summoning process, the two young girls went to the front yard fully expecting to see their special chosen men strolling down the road towards them to answer their prayers and respond to their summons.

Unfortunately, instead of the special men, they witnessed a horrible dark being walking towards them that seemed to have been summoned directly from the gates of Hell. They described it as a tall dark monster moving slowly but purposely towards them. They said its eyes were large and glowing and it was almost nine feet tall and hideous.

The girls screamed and ran into the house. Mr. Clark saw the creature through the window and watched as the monster silently peered into the home. Mr. Clark then closed his eyes and began to pray as the horrible monster continued to stare into the home. When he finally opened his eyes again, the awful creature was thankfully gone.

Word quickly spread and many believed that Comfort and Hannah had accidentally summoned the devil himself and had called upon him to come to Westerly. The girls were punished and prayed for forgiveness. They vowed to dedicate their lives to their religion and to avoid “magic” or “witchcraft”. Reportedly, the devil apparently never returned to Westerly in that hideous, monstrous, ethereal form again.

Their story was told and retold and passed on to the next generation urging the youth of the community to dedicate their lives to their religion and avoid participating in “magic” or “witchcraft” to avoid unintentionally inviting the devil back into Westerly.

**(Continued On Next Page)**



More than fifty years later, an elderly woman, Mrs. Rogers, came to Westerly seeking the Clarke family. She had been living in Newport for more than half a century and had just lost her husband, Daniel Rogers. She was returning to Westerly to fulfill her husband's dying wish for her to find the Clarke's and reveal his awful secret. A secret he had told no one in decades but wished to confess on his deathbed.

Apparently, Daniel had been staying in Westerly with the Hiscox family just down the road from the Clarke residence on that fateful day when the Devil was summoned. He was a witness to the girls screaming and running into the home and a witness to Mr. Clarke praying in fear. He was also a witness to the fear and panic that gripped the town that day as word spread that the girls had been seeking love and romance but instead had unintentionally conjured up the devil and brought him to town.

Daniel left town that day and went to Newport where he lived the remainder of his life, never returning to Westerly and never speaking of what he had witnessed. He was afraid not because he had seen the devil but because he had seen the panic that had erupted and feared the reprisals that would surely come.

As Paul Harvey would probably say, "This is the rest of the story".

On that fateful day, Daniel had been bored and decided to have fun and play a prank. The tall young man dressed up in a monster costume and began walking towards the neighbor's house. When he saw the girls, he strode towards them hoping to scare them a bit before surprising them by revealing his true identity.

Little did he know that by sheer coincidence, the girls had just been in the backyard attempting to use a bit of hope, a dose of magic, and a mythical ancient spell to create their own fate and summon their own special men.

Daniel was so embarrassed and afraid when he realized how much fear and panic he had caused that he made the decision to tell no one and leave Westerly immediately. He was never able to forgive himself for the chaos and fear he had created and lived his life in fear that someone would one day discover his terrible secret. Perhaps his deathbed request to his wife was a last desperate attempt to seek forgiveness for a simple prank that had gone horribly wrong.

His wife's visit to Westerly following his death decades later literally changed history!

The truth was finally exposed and the fact was finally revealed that contrary to the stories that had been told and retold for fifty years, the Devil himself had not actually risen and walked the streets of Westerly on the fateful day.

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

**The following excerpts are the final 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.**

The *Sun* reporter, Herbert P. Clark, testified with regard to the stories he had written about the whole incident. Clark offered a comment Strickland had made, he said, “the Gavitt restaurant was one of the cleanest restaurants he had been in.”

Stonington Health Officer Charles F. Congdon had shied away from any intervention in the case as he had been told “that it was a case for the factory inspector.” He did not feel he would be justified in shutting the place down.

The editorial board of the *Sun* for a week remained silent on the entire affair. Then they suggested that a “specialist in poison cases” ought to be called in. “If such a specialist...could be had, he might recognize the trouble”.

At the next day's hearing in Stonington it was Alexander R. Gavitt and his witnesses who had a chance to speak. Lillian Cameron, Charles Farraro, Ernest Young, Raymond C. Neill, and George E. Chapman, all of Westerly, attested to not becoming ill after eating Gavitt's pies during the Fourth of July just past. Gavitt, himself, was at a loss to explain the illnesses suffered by his customers. He had followed his standard operating procedure for making pies that week.

As to the insecticides, Gavitt stated that every precaution is taken to isolate the food when it was used. Store employees Thomas F. Fontana, Fred Steiger, James G. O'Gara, and Ruby Congdon essentially fortified and reiterated the testimony given by their employer.

Charles S. Brightman of Stonington Road, another of Francis T. Brightman's sons, was the final witness before the inquiry panel that day. He repeated that it was from the food eaten at Gavitt's Restaurant that his parents received their illness. A continuation of the hearings was judiciously requested by Prosecuting Attorney Benjamin Hewitt until some definitive reports had been released by the scientific investigators.

It was on the next Monday (19<sup>th</sup>) that Gavitt began to see his incipient exoneration from liability appear. The Connecticut State Chemist, Frank P. Underhill, reported “a clean bill of health for the shortening, dough, and cocoanut taken from the Gavitt restaurant.” He found no poisons in the food samples. By the 21<sup>st</sup>, Rhode Island State Chemist, Franklin N. Strickland, had reached the same conclusion after his analysis of the foodstuffs he and Jackson had brought to his lab. “The analysis of the ingredients used in making the pies contained no mineral poisons,” his report claimed.

So what did cause so many people to become ill and three to perish? Strickland said that R.I. Bacteriologist, Dr. Harry S. Bernstein, was at present exploring a theory that some kind of bacteria was the culprit. Strickland and Bernstein reasoned, “We feel quite certain that the cause of the illness and death was brought about by some, at present, unaccountable way due to the Ptomaine produced by some form of bacteria in some of the food.”

The Stonington hearings were restarted on July 28, but no new evidence was heard. The Justices then decided to await the bacteriologists' reports before taking any action.

Professor Leo F. Rettger of the Storrs Agricultural Experiment Station dismissed the bacteria theory. He relied instead on a theory of chronic disease aggravated by acute indigestion in his report of August 9, 1915. His conclusion was based on a study of compounds found in the organs of Horace Rodman of Ashaway. In his report he spoke of the four patients who had died. He declared that two of them, Sullivan and Rodman, “both were afflicted with Bright's Disease [a kidney malfunction].

(Continued on next page)

## THOSE PESKY PIES!!! By Thomas A. O'Connell – Part 4 (Conclusion)

Professor Rettger also noted that if a person has that complaint, any acute illness, especially of the stomach and bowels, is liable to end fatally.” The Brightmans were elderly and as no post-mortem exam was done, it could not be discovered if they had any chronic diseases. Yes, but what of the folks who only became ill, but did not die? What caused their sickness? His theory was problematic and opaque.

He explained any remaining doubts in this fashion: *In summing up the results of my investigation I wish to state briefly that no organism of any significance or bearing in any way on the outbreak of the so-called ‘poisoning epidemic’ has been found. There is no proof, however, that no bacteria, which may have been responsible for the disease, were present at least in the organs examined. Present day bacteriological methods are still insufficiently developed to enable the investigator to pronounce the absence of bacteria when negative results are obtained.*

Dr. Harry S. Bernstein in his report of August 23<sup>rd</sup> said, “The death and illness from eating pie was due to a germ which is one of three that belong to the typhoid family.” Bernstein used dried blood samples taken for him from the body of Horace Rodman by Dr. Gardner T. Swarts, to conduct a series of experiments on laboratory animals that died as a result of injections he administered.

The results showed these short, rod shaped organisms extracted from the dead animals were the same as those found in both the piecrust and pie filling. Dr. Bernstein isolated *bacillus paratyphosus* one of the typhoid group of germs which he had read about in current medical literature as causing the same symptoms as were displayed in the Westerly food poisoning epidemic as the culprit.

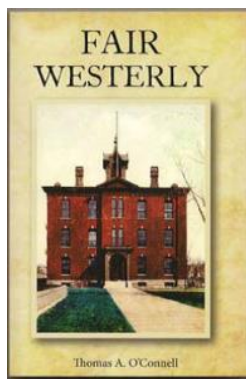
After Dr. Harry S. Bernstein’s exhaustive report was published the “poison pie epidemic” vanished from the newspapers. The truth of the matter is that if people are made ill by the food they consume, there must be a reason. Only by patient, careful analysis of the evidence and facts of the situation will the cause ever be discovered, eradicated, and corrective measures employed.

**The End**

***We sincerely appreciate Thomas O’Connell’s offer to allow us to reprint this four-part series of excerpts from his second book titled “In and About Westerly”.***

***This book as well as his other two books are available for purchase online on our website located at***

**[www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org)**

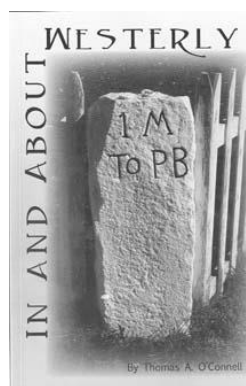


### ***Fair Westerly***

By Thomas O’Connell.

*Written, compiled, and edited by Tom in 2014, with essays written by a variety of local authors. The book contains a complete index of people, events, and place names.*

Price.....\$19.95

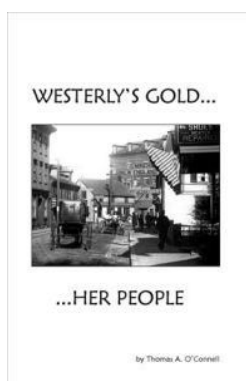


### ***In and About Westerly***

By Thomas A. O’Connell.

*Written, compiled, and edited by Tom in 2008. These essays were all originally published in the Westerly Historical Society’s newsletter and paint a picture of the lives and the activities of Westerly citizens.*

Price.....\$22.00



### ***Westerly’s Gold ... Her People***

By Thomas A. O’Connell.


*Published in 2003. Discover the achievements and lives of our hidden treasures, our most talented predecessors. Discover that change is less than it seems over the past one hundred years.*

Price.....\$12.95.

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