



# Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

February 2024

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## Program Notes

### THANK YOU NOTES

The Executive Board of the Westerly Historical Society would like to extend our appreciation to our long-term member, David Rathbun, for the generous donation of a large collection of various local historical items. (See Page 5 for Details).

The Executive Board of the Westerly Historical Society would also like to extend our sincerest appreciation to all of our members who have generously renewed their membership for 2024!

### SAVE THE DATES

We have scheduled a program on March 13th with Christian McBurney who will discuss his new book titled "Machine Guns In Narragansett Bay; The Coast Guard's War On Rum Runners". Christian will present a summary of his book followed by a focus on an incident that occurred off Watch Hill near Napatree Point.

We are working on another joint summer program on Fort Mansfield co-sponsored by the Watch Hill Conservancy and presented by Jack Spratt. The date remains to be determined but it is expected to be in late June.

### SEEKING SPEAKERS

We are still seeking speakers to present programs for the society. If you know anyone who is familiar with a particular local history topic and enjoys talking about their passion, please let us know.

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

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# 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.*

Hello friends and welcome to the February edition of Westerly's Witness.

First, I am very happy to report that close to 75% of our members have renewed their membership for 2024. If you haven't renewed yet please do so to ensure continuation of your member benefits.

Last month I was contacted by long time WHS member David Rathbun who was cleaning out his office at the historic Elite Cleaners building in preparation for its upcoming sale. David was offering a plethora of historic items, publications and photos from Westerly's past. A 1940 yearbook from Westerly High, a photo of a worker affixing one of the last tiles on the recently demolished Ledward Avenue water tower upon its completion, a nice collection of Navy medals from a WWII Westerly hero, (look in a future Westerly's witness for the story behind the heroes accomplishments), and a collection of tax books from the 1950's to the 1970's reflecting how the value of real property in our town has changed over the past several decades were some of my favorites from David's collection.

These items are just the type of things we are looking for to expand our archival collection. If you know of anyone cleaning out an attic, basement, garage, or business please consider giving us a look to see if we can salvage something special for our collection.

Lastly, I am excited to share that our society friend and author, Jack Spratt, has offered to put on a program in June on Fort Mansfield! The fort with its rich history is one of my favorite landmarks in Westerly so I am very much looking forward to this presentation for several reasons, it's sure to be entertaining and educational and it is planned for the end of June when the air temperatures are sure to be farther North on the thermostat than the 19 degrees I'm looking at this evening.

Stay warm and well my friends,

Tom

## EDITOR'S NOTES

*Thank you to Jack Spratt for contributing a column with photos for this month's newsletter describing recently uncovered relics found in the sand along Napatree Point following the strong storm in December.*

*We always welcome newsletter submissions by our members and encourage you to consider writing an article for inclusion.*

***As always, this is your newsletter!***

**Thank you very much for all of the kind words and supportive emails regarding the new and improved newsletter.**

**We sincerely appreciate all of your positive comments and we certainly enjoy hearing from you.**

***Please let us know what you think!***

# Westerly Fire Department – New Aerial Ladder Truck in 1938

By Robert Peacock

According to the December 21st, 1938 Westerly Sun, a new ladder truck was delivered to the Westerly Fire District. The headline read “New Aerial Ladder Truck Is Delivered” and three sub headlines included “Replaces Old Apparatus In Use By Town For 24 Years” and “Seagraves Model” and “Net And Other Extras To Use Balance Of \$15,000 Of Appropriation”.

The article reported that “The new aerial hook and ladder truck for the Westerly Fire Department, for which \$15,000 was appropriated at the last annual district meeting in August, arrived at the station last evening. It will replace the old ladder truck which has served the district for 24 years and has become outmoded.”

The newspaper noted that “The new apparatus, a Seagraves model with a 65-foot steel aerial ladder and more than 200 feet of portable wooden ladders of varying lengths, cost \$13,950, and the life net, 200 feet of hydrant hose, special lights, extinguishers, and other accessories will use the balance of the appropriation.”

For comparison purposes, [www.officialdata.org](http://www.officialdata.org) notes that \$1 in 1938 is equivalent in purchasing power to about \$21.52 today, an increase of \$20.52 over 85 years. As a result, the \$15,000 spent on the new truck in 1938 would be equivalent to \$322,726.60 in current dollars. Interestingly, recent purchases of new ladder trucks in 2023 have averaged well over one million dollars.

The article reported on a new feature of the ladder truck, printing that the aerial ladder, which was a feature of the new truck, was mounted on a rotating disk capable of a 180-degree arc with the operation being controlled by hydraulic pressure. A 100-gallon booster tank was also built into the truck chassis.

Training was to be provided by the truck manufacturer and the paper noted that the “demonstrator of the Seagraves Company who brought the truck here last night will remain for about a week to instruct the firemen in the workings of the apparatus.”

Chief Columbus J. Passetti told the reporter at the time that “it will probably take ten days or more to put the truck through the necessary tests for the acceptance.”

The truck was officially turned over to the members of the Alert Hook and Ladder Company on January 7<sup>th</sup> at the 55<sup>th</sup> annual banquet of the company held at the Oaks Inn on Shore Road. The new truck was formally accepted by Foreman George Pendleton on behalf of the members of the Alert Hook and Ladder Company.

The new truck responded to its first fire just a few weeks later. According to the January 23, 1939 edition of the Westerly Sun, an article headlined “Department Uses New \$15,000 Aerial Ladder For First Time” with a sub heading of “Proves Highly Efficient In Fighting Chimney Fire At Main Street Tenement House; Adds To Safety Of Men”. The article notes that the fire at 147 Main Street was quickly and safely extinguished using the new ladder truck and reported “all who saw its speedy operation were loud in singing its praises.”

Chief Passetti also praised the efficiency of the truck in the article and noted that “it was just a little fire but it could have developed into something really serious. It took us less than ten minutes to check the blaze and get back to the station. At former fires it took nearly that long to get the old ladders off the trucks, raise them to the roof and then scale the chimney. It was dangerous business especially on a cold windy day.”

Chief Passetti also proclaimed that “the town will never regret that we purchased this truck because it will pay for itself every time we go to a fire and the best part of the whole business is that it is making it safer for the firemen.”



*The truck served Westerly well for 33 years before it was replaced in 1971 and sold to Community Fire Company in North Grosvenor Dale Connecticut, then to the “Haul of Fame” Trucking Museum in Canterbury Connecticut, and then to a private buyer in Milton, New Hampshire. This is a recent photo found on Facebook of its current condition.*

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## **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

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

### **ANNUAL HISTORY AWARD**



An annual award of up to \$500.00 will be given to a person or persons, grade 5 through adulthood, who furthers the mission of researching, studying, and/or preserving local history in our community. Secondary consideration will be given to someone who exhibits a passion for history unrelated to the local community.

The applications or nomination must be submitted by **April 1, 2024** by post mail to

Westerly Historical Society  
PO Box 91  
Westerly, RI 02891

or by email to [whspresident@gmail.com](mailto:whspresident@gmail.com).

**Note: Additional supporting material or information may be submitted with an application, but will not be returned**

The application form can be found on the Babcock-Smith House Museum website and on the Westerly Historical Society website.

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

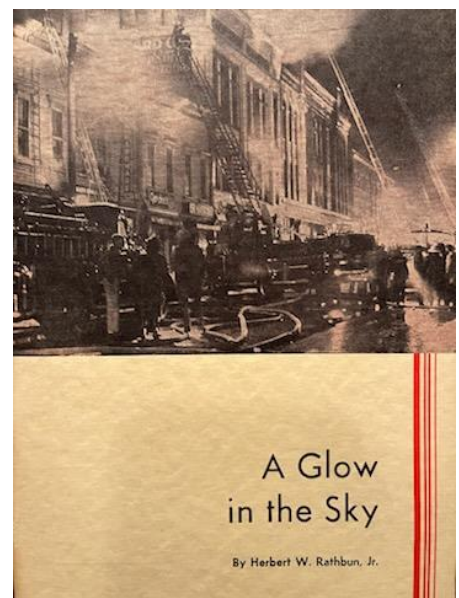
[www.babcocksmithhouse.org](http://www.babcocksmithhouse.org)

## 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 appreciate any and all Westerly related donations!

*Recent donations to our continually expanding historical archives includes a significant collection from Mr. David Rathbun. The collection from his office in the former Elite Cleaners building filled several boxes and includes a wide variety of Westerly related historical items including books, photos, awards, directories, and tax books. Notable items include a 1940 Westerly High School yearbook, town public works photos, town aerial photos, military awards, fire department photos, a copy of the 1991 book "Old Pictures of Westerly", a copy of the 1963 Westerly book "A Glow in the Sky", and numerous Westerly phone and address Polk Directories.*



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's Cemeteries

## Westerly Cemetery # 013 - The Chapman Lot

### By Robert Peacock

There were reportedly 12 burials in this cemetery with 5 marked by fieldstones and 7 marked by carved headstones. The most recent known burial was in 1881 and the oldest known burial was in 1825.

Included are the remains of Abby S. Chapman, who was born in 1793 and passed on March 28<sup>th</sup> of 1849. She was the wife of John Chapman and the mother of Sumner Chapman who are both believed to be buried in the original family cemetery (Westerly Cemetery Number 22) located approximately one mile down the road. Sumner's wife, Betsey Herrick Chapman, is also believed to be buried there as well.

While recognized and noted on the family monument as Sumner Chapman, son of John Chapman, who was born in 1724 and passed on December 13<sup>th</sup> of 1812. It is believed that his remains are with his father in Westerly Cemetery # 22 located approximately one mile down the road. Sumner Chapman was a veteran of the Revolutionary War and served as a private in the Alarm Company under Captain Edward Oliver. The inscription on the shared family monument under his name reads "Remember friends as you pass by as you are now so once was as I am now so you must be prepared for death and follow me". Although it appears a bit cryptic, this epitaph was one of the most common epitaphs seen on stones and monuments during the 1800's.

The family monument also includes the name Betsey Herrick, wife of Sumner Chapman. However, her birth and death dates are not recorded and are not listed on the family monument.

Also included are the remains of Joseph Chapman, who was born in 1767 and passed on June 22<sup>nd</sup> of 1856, along with his first wife, Elizabeth Kenyon Chapman, who was born in 1771 and passed on July 6<sup>th</sup> of 1825, as well as his second wife, Eunice Clark Chapman, who was born in 1777 and passed on February 16<sup>th</sup> of 1849. Joseph's elaborate coffin plate was forged by a local silversmith, Thomas Perry of Westerly.

Also included are the remains of John Chapman, son of Joseph Chapman, who was born in 1792 and passed in 1881 along with his wife, Abigail Sisson, who was born in 1794 and passed in 1849. John's inscription on the shared family monument reads "Know that my redeemer liveth" and Abigail's inscription reads "Blessed are the peacemakers".

The cemetery is approximately twelve feet by sixteen feet and is surrounded by a three foot tall and one foot thick wall of large rectangular rough carved granite blocks which appear to have been added after the 1860's. The interior includes several carved individual head stones and foot stones as well as a large granite shared family monument centered within the enclosure.

According to the 1878 book by Frederic Denison, "Westerly and Its Witnesses", the cemetery was recorded in the 1860's as being "On the land of G.W. Cottrell, on the north side of the new road, by the roadside, enclosed by a fence, in a pasture." He also noted that "several graves are unlettered".

The cemetery is located approximately 300 feet past Pound Road on the opposite side of the Westerly Bradford Road in front of 340 Westerly Bradford Road. Access is relatively easy from the road through the light brush and trees. The family that owns the property also allows access to the cemetery through their yard but be aware that they have a dog that roams freely in the yard and has a large bark! Interestingly, the granite block wall surrounding the cemetery has no opening to allow access to the interior of the cemetery.

The cemetery is maintained by the current property owner, the Carsten Family, and is cleaned and cleared each fall. Their son, Noah Carsten, completed a senior project in 2013 which included researching the cemetery and bringing in an excavator to clear the surrounding area of heavy brush and to reset several large wall stones which had been slowly dislodged over many years by the slow and steady growth of a tree.

For those using GPS, the cemetery is located at 41 Degrees, 22 minutes, and 50.8 seconds North by 71 degrees, 47 minutes, and 7.4 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 Historic Cemeteries Commissioner Larry Hunter, and information from the property owners, the Carsten family.*



*The cemetery is approximately twelve feet by sixteen feet and is surrounded by a three foot tall and one foot thick wall of large rectangular rough carved granite blocks which appear to have been added after the 1860's. Interestingly, the granite block wall surrounding the cemetery has no opening to allow access to the interior of the cemetery.*



*The interior of the cemetery appears to be relatively well maintained although a few stones have fallen and need to be reset. The interior includes several carved individual head stones and foot stones as well as a large granite shared family monument centered within the enclosure.*





*The cemetery is maintained by the property owner, the Carsten Family, and is cleaned and cleared each fall. Their son, Noah Carsten, completed a senior project in 2013 which included researching the cemetery and bringing in an excavator to clear the surrounding area of heavy brush and to reset several large wall stones which were slowly dislodged over many years by the slow and steady growth of a tree. (Westerly Sun Photo)*

**Remnants of Fort Mansfield’s Seawall ashore following December 18, 2023 Storm.**



**Image 1**

**Seawall along beach. NAR**



**Image 2**

**Remains of seawall washed up on Napatree Dec. 18, 2023**



**Image 3**

The boisterous weather (strong gale 47-54 mph) at Watch Hill, Monday December 18, 2023, out of the south and south-southeast, with gusts of 67 mph (measured by Spratt), over two high tide cycles caused flooding of Bay Street, over-wash and significant erosion on Napatree and East Beaches. The plunging breakers attacked Napatree beach, from sustained winds across a long fetch to the south and southeast, open to the Atlantic, making a straight shot between Sugar and Watch Hill reefs, colliding full force on the middle of Napatree beach where the sections of the seawall were found. The thunderous rumblings of the rote charged up on the beach, the wave action scoured the surf zone unearthing and depositing long buried artifacts from shipwrecks, cottages, and Fort Mansfield.

The seawall can be seen in image 1, running the length of the fort along the beach. The arrow points to the general location of the bulkhead as well as towards Watch Hill. In images 2 and 3, are the battered pieces of the fort bulkhead that the December 18 storm dug up and deposited on the beach.

The U.S. Governments decision to develop a coast artillery fortification, Fort Mansfield, with accommodations for 120 soldiers on the fragile barrier beach connecting Watch Hill to Napatree Point had significant challenges from its inception. If not for the Spanish American War and the hysteria and fear that the Spanish Armada was headed for the eastern entrance to Long Island Sound, the fort would probably never have been built. When construction began in August of 1898 there were no roads out to Napatree and Sandy Point, no wharf to land men, materials, equipment, and supplies onto, no fresh water, and a summer community overwhelmingly against the project. The most critical challenges to the construction of the fort were how to keep the sea from inundating and destroying the infrastructure, buildings, and the gun battery located on the beach.

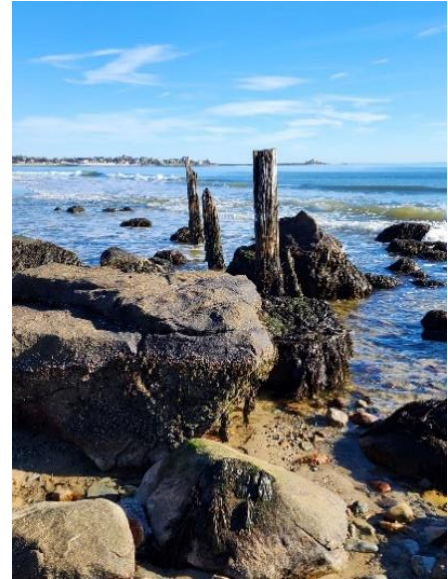
In August of 1898, the T.A. Scott Company of New London began driving piles for a 400-foot wharf and a seawall, a tight fence of plank with stout posts of hard pine running the entire length of the south side of the government property, designed for protecting the buildings and beach gun emplacement from the surf. Captain Scott had 30 days to complete the bulkhead. During the construction of Fort Mansfield, three storms with high surf damaged the fort buildings.

*Continued on Next Page*

## NAPATREE BEACH ARTIFACTS BY CAPTAIN JACK SPRATT

In May of 1903, Captain Scott was awarded a contract to repair and improve the bulkhead from the constant beach erosion. Another storm followed in 1914 which came out of the southeast and destroyed the wharf and washed away 60 feet of seawall was washed away. Captain Scott was again contracted to repair the damage.

The piles at the end of Napatree, seen in the photos below, are not the remains of a dock or fort building, they are the remains of the hard pine piles of the seawall/bulkhead.



*Captain Jack Spratt has written numerous articles and books and given talks on the history of Watch Hill and Fishers Island Sound. Jack operates historical charter boat tours aboard his classic catboat TRIM AGAIN and motor yacht ENCORE out of Watch Hill. Jack donates his time and monies from his books and a portion of his charters to local organizations including Mystic Seaport Museum, NESS, local libraries, and historical societies. Look for his talks this summer, A History of Fort Mansfield and A Historical Tour of the Lighthouses, Lightships, Forts, Life Saving Stations and Cottages of Fishers Island Sound including Watch Hill, Fishers Island, Stonington, Noank and Little Narragansett Bay.*

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