

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

# HARBINGER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WESTPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY [WWW.WPTHISTORY.ORG](http://WWW.WPTHISTORY.ORG)  
PO BOX N188, WESTPORT, MA 02790-1203, [WESTPORTHISTORY@WESTPORTHISTORY.NET](mailto:WESTPORTHISTORY@WESTPORTHISTORY.NET)



Winter 2016, vol.49, no.1



## ANNUAL APPEAL

Expand your local history horizons!

Explore Westport's history

@ our Website

Share memories and knowledge

@ our Facebook page

Connect with our collections

@ our collections database

Visit [www.wpthistory.org](http://www.wpthistory.org)

We would like to thank the many individuals who have already donated to our annual fund. However, we traditionally receive more than half our annual appeal donations after the end of the year.

At what age did you first encounter the past and discover an appreciation of its value to the present? Did this happen as a child? And grow into a lifelong interest?

In our increasingly complex world, creating opportunities to encounter the past remains surprisingly simple. These moments might be a third grader pulling a bucket full of water from the Handy House well, a first grader learning the art of hand sewing, or an eight year old stepping into a child's scale model of Westport's oldest house, the Waite-Potter house.

Did you know that your support for the Society has created multiple new experiences for Westport's younger generations and families to encounter the past?

You have helped us to welcome over 1000 people to the Handy House.

You have enabled the entire Westport first grade and third grade to explore the Handy House.

You have given the entire third grade the chance to step inside the historic Cory Store at Westport Point and learn about our whaling, fishing, and maritime heritage.



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THE WESTPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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#### MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Westport Historical Society is to engage the public in the exploration of the town’s rich history and culture, to inspire a spirit of discovery through educational programs and encourage active participation in the preservation and interpretation of our past.

The Society collects and shares this history. Its goal is to foster the imaginative process of connecting to the past, making it relevant to our present and vital to the future of our community.

The *Harbinger* is published by the Westport Historical Society, a 501(c)(3) non profit organization.

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You have sustained scholarship and educational opportunities on topics as diverse as slavery, the Westport Fire Department, as well as our new winter history forum and our now annual Westport History 101 seminars.

You have given 200 intrepid parents and kids the chance to experience the historically inspired Dr. Handy’s Ghastly Ghost Hunt this Halloween.

You have safeguarded a collection of 10,000 items relating to Westport’s history and helped us to share our collections through Pop Up Museums and our website.

You have celebrated the vibrant local culture of traditional craftsmanship showcased at our annual Artisan Fair.

You have brought 400 families to some of the most beautiful and historically significant places in Westport as part of our Summer Passport activity.

We are deeply grateful for your on-going support of the Society. This annual appeal is the foundation for our year to come, providing one third of our operating income. Please help us to reach our goal of \$33,000. If you are a previous donor, please consider a move to a new gift level. If you are a new donor, please understand that your participation is critical to our success. Would you consider becoming a sustaining member with an automatically scheduled monthly gift? Donations can be made securely online via our website [www.wpthistory.org](http://www.wpthistory.org).

Your gift will ignite young minds, fire imaginations and ensure that current and future generations will continue to encounter the past!

Thank you.



## HOW WESTPORT BECAME A TOWN

by Tony Connors

Most sources describing Westport’s split from Dartmouth say something like: “In 1787 Westport separated from Dartmouth and was incorporated as an independent town.” That’s it! But we know that it must have been more difficult than that. Separations are always contentious, involving negotiations, accusations, winners and losers. While this makes the story of Westport’s birth more complex, it’s also more interesting.

Let’s start with some context: what was this area like in the years just after the Revolution? Americans had just defeated (or outlasted) the most powerful military force in the world. But the new nation was not feeling confident at all. There was a post-war depression and the Treasury was empty. The government was only a loose confederation of independent states, and many feared the country would not survive.

Massachusetts also suffered an economic depression, with very little money in circulation, exacerbated by Britain’s prohibition on New Englanders from engaging in the lucrative West Indies trade. The burden of tax increases to pay for the war fell mostly on farmers, often resulting in foreclosures and debtors prison. This led to open revolt in central Massachusetts, as Shays’ Rebellion attempted to close the courts and stop foreclosures. It was a military failure, but did lead to reforms a few years later. It seems like an inauspicious time for Westport to separate from the stability and familiarity of Dartmouth, but that’s when the opportunity presented itself.

Before it became independent, Westport was part of “Old Dartmouth.” The lands of Dartmouth had been purchased in 1652 from the Wampanoag sachem

Massasoit. The lands known as Acushnea, Ponagansett, and Coaksett were incorporated as the town of Dartmouth in 1664. Old Dartmouth was huge, about 220 square miles, made up of the current towns of Dartmouth, Westport, New Bedford, Fairhaven, Acushnet, and parts of Tiverton and Little Compton. At the time, Dartmouth’s population was mostly in semi-independent villages: Acushnet Village, Oxford Village (Fairhaven), and Bedford Village; Smith Mills, Russells Mills, and Padanaram (Dartmouth); and Acoaxet Village and Paquachuck Point (Westport). Numerous north-south rivers divided Dartmouth, making east-west travel very difficult. With town hall at Smith Mills (near today’s Dartmouth Mall), this extensive town would have been difficult to administer, and hard for people in outlying areas to get to town hall, attend town meeting, get licenses, and otherwise attend to town business.

Westport’s independence was triggered by New Bedford’s split from Dartmouth. On September 27, 1786, a petition by 11 residents of the eastern portion of Dartmouth requested a meeting to “vote off Acushnet Village to be incorporated into a separate town.” That meeting took place on October 9, and “after large discussion thereon,” the petition was voted down 181-0. It appears that the petitioners boycotted the vote, but it was certainly clear that this idea was very unpopular with the rest of Dartmouth. The Acushnet Village residents then petitioned the state legislature, who examined whether the proposed town would have sufficient population, government leaders, and tax base to support education. Satisfied with the answers, the state agreed, and on February 23, 1787, the eastern portion

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## Education News

#### FULL STEAM AHEAD!

We are excited to have received funding from the Westport Local Cultural Council to create an innovative curriculum. Using the Handy House as a model, students will study architecture, building systems, design and local history. Students will learn STEAM concepts (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math), problem solve and meet community professionals (architect, building inspector, historian, builders) to connect classroom learning to this local treasure.

#### VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR 2016 EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR LOCAL SCHOOLS!

Our quilt project continues in 2016. The Westport Historical Society and the Westport Education Foundation have partnered on a project to perpetuate the art of hand sewing. With the help of volunteers, the 2nd graders will create a Queen sized quilt to be raffled off to benefit the Westport Education Foundation. Along the way, the students will learn about local history, the craft of hand sewing and quilting, working as part of a team, and a sense of accomplishment that will help build self-esteem.

Volunteers are also needed to assist with spring time field trips to Westport Point, the Head of Westport and the Handy House.

Please contact Kathleen McAreavey, Manager of Education 508 636 6011, [education@westporthistory.net](mailto:education@westporthistory.net), or visit our website for more information.

#### BUS FUND

Did you know that it costs \$10 per student to transport them by bus to the Handy House? Please consider a special donation to give one third grader the chance to visit the Handy House and begin a life-long appreciation of the heritage of Westport.



of Dartmouth was incorporated as a separate town. The plan was to call the new town “Bedford,” but a town of that name already existed in Massachusetts, so they (unimaginatively) called it New Bedford. Fairhaven and Acushnet were part of this new town until 1812, when Fairhaven split from New Bedford. Acushnet separated from Fairhaven in 1860.

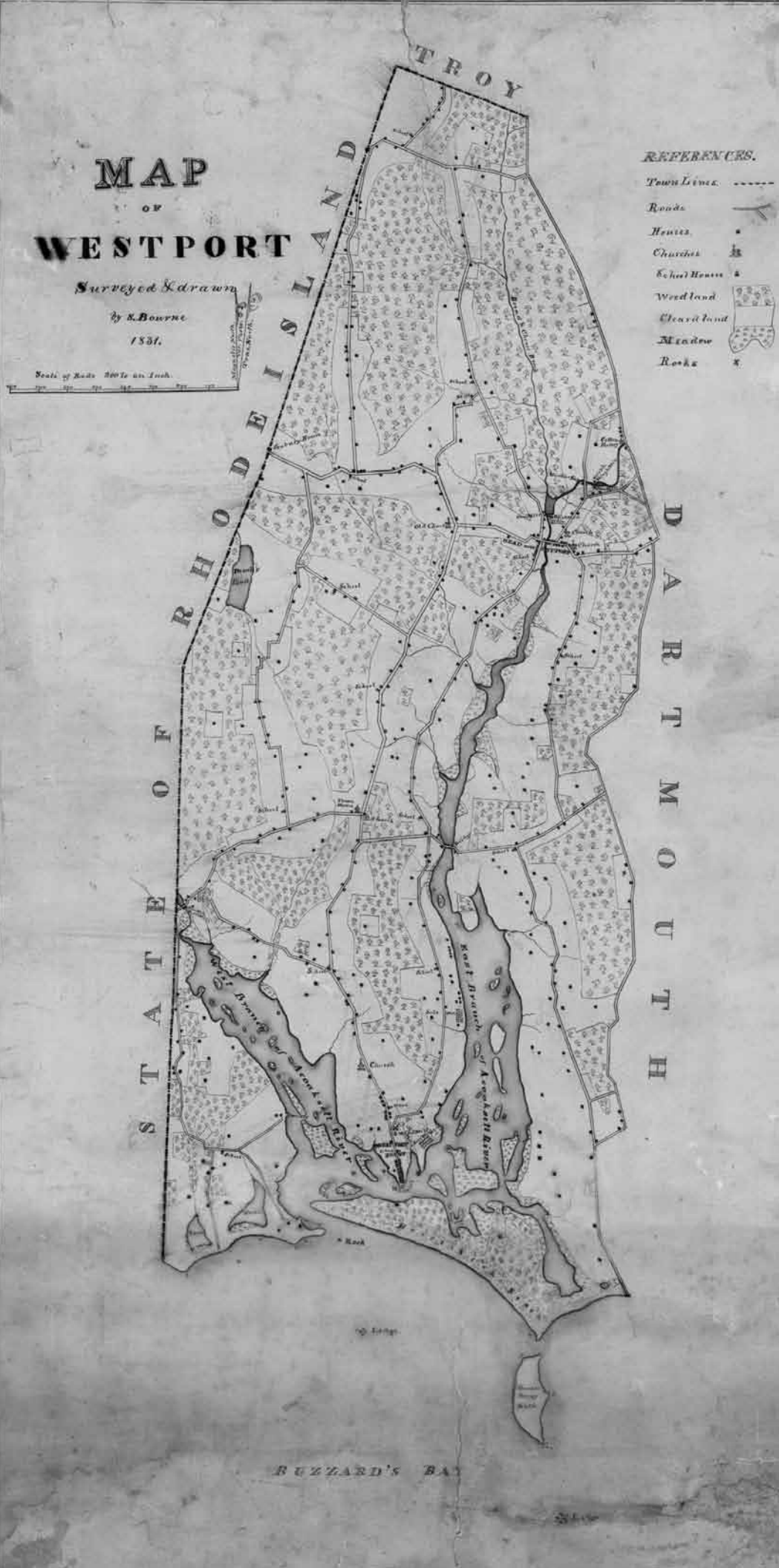
None of this went unnoticed by the people of Acoaxet. At the far western end of town, they had the same geographical inconvenience as the people from eastern Dartmouth. The Quakers had already led the way—the Acoaxet Monthly Meeting had been established at Central Village in 1766, giving Acoaxet the same level of church government as Dartmouth. Perhaps this religious movement encouraged civil independence.

Learning from the New Bedford experience, the 125 Acoaxet petitioners did not ask for a vote at Dartmouth Town Meeting, and instead directly petitioned the state legislature on February 19, 1787. Their reasons included:

- From the start of Dartmouth (1664) there were three separate sections, including “Accoakset.” (suggesting it was meant to be a separate town)

- “Each village contains as much land and as many inhabitants as by experience are found necessary & convenient to constitute a town.” (true: there were 2400 inhabitants)

- Dartmouth is “so divided by rivers that it is very inconvenient going out of one village into the other to attend on town business.”



- Distance to town meeting is from 6 to 14 miles, “which is an inconvenience severely felt.”

On March 2, the House of Representatives sent a letter to Dartmouth asking why this petition should not be granted. But the fight wasn’t over yet. Some Acoaxet residents protested, asking the Legislature not to split the town, because of “discord and disadvantage that it will cause” in the village. They argued that some village residents had been influenced by “mistaken bias” leading them to support a division that was “contrary to a unanimous vote of the town [Dartmouth] at a legal town meeting.” (So apparently there was a meeting on the subject, although after the petition had gone to the State.) The protesters called on God for support: “the God of Nature has so situated the town (as to its conveniences and inconveniences) that a division of the town will be very injurious to many of the inhabitants....” This echoes the language of the Declaration of Independence (“...the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them...”), but here it was used to oppose independence. They also added a more practical argument: any boundary line will “divide some of the farms, which will render the sale of their farms very disadvantageous.”

The petitioners responded. They had not been able to attend the special Town Meeting due to inclement weather, so the vote against separation was not a true measure of popular sentiment. Then it got more personal. The petitioners considered their opponents good men (“we esteem them as our fellow Towns Men”), but “for want of Literature and instructive advantages in political affairs, together with being over Ballanced by the

love of Private Interest, [they] may not be Enterprizing in their Discoveries of Public advantages.” That is, they might be nice people, but not smart enough to decide this matter! The petitioners, on the other hand, cast themselves as the good citizens, who asked “that your Honours would with generous and human affection Consider us (the Loyal subjects and Friends of the Constitution of Government of this Common Wealth) under all our Embarrassments and Disadvantages in our Present Standing and connection in this Town.” This does suggest a class element to the split.

At a meeting in Acoaxet Village on June 26, a poll showed that 123 village residents were in favor of division, and 65 opposed it. Even if all remaining voters were against, the petition would pass. It was also noted that a mere 30 of the proponents paid more in taxes than all the objectors combined. While this is another indication of a split along class and wealth lines, it was also about geography: many of the objectors lived close to Dartmouth and saw no advantage to separation.

Despite objections, the Legislature approved the separation, and on July 2, 1787, Westport was incorporated. But why the name “Westport”? All references up to this point had been to Acoaxet or Acoaxet Village. This had been the local name for the area, as well as the two branches of the river. But instead the town was named in reference to its location as the westernmost port in Massachusetts. While “Acoaxet” might have been more historically appropriate, Westport is a perfectly good name—and much better than New Dartmouth!

An unusual feature of the charter was an

apparent concession to those who opposed the split: anyone who wanted to remain a Dartmouth taxpayers could do so, by paying all arrears, plus all new taxes to Dartmouth, and then registering to remain a Dartmouth resident. But some of those who remained loyal to Dartmouth still wanted a tax break. There was a petition from 44 citizens of Acoaxet Village who “have a mind to belong to the town of Dartmouth” but ask “not to call upon us to mend your highways as it is a large Distance for many of us to come....” This was approved Sept. 16, 1787, but proved unworkable. Westport Town Meeting decided in 1793 to abide by state arbitration requiring all citizens living within Westport to pay taxes to Westport.

Now that Westport was an independent town, there was work to be done. First was a new “Town House” (town hall), which was built in 1789. The town house was not at the Point or the Head (the two most populous villages) but at the corner of Main and Adamsville Roads. This central location had good transportation routes, and proved to be a good choice. Central Village would be the administrative center of Westport, although not a commercial center until the 20th century.

Another early task was to settle the town boundaries, which took a while. The Division Road boundary was not resolved until 1799. Parts of Dartmouth were annexed to Westport in 1793, 1795, and 1805, and a final settlement of boundaries was not achieved until 1828—a delay of 40 years! Care of the poor was another critical issue. People needing public welfare were not accepted if they were originally from another town. If they were legitimate recipients of welfare, they were typically cared for by citizens





L to R: Ella Sherberg, Norma Judson, unidentified, Frances Kirkaldy holding a quilt, 1974.



# NORMA JUDSON

## AN APPRECIATION

Norma Judson passed away on August 1, 2015. As she would have preferred, this is an occasion to celebrate all that she did to preserve and share Westport’s history.

She didn’t just study Westport’s history—she lived it. As a local businesswoman she opened the Moby Dick Shop in 1953 and Silas Brown’s in 1969. She continued in business for forty-four years until her retirement. Her passion was history and historic preservation. She served on committees to preserve the Bell School, the Wolf Pit School, and the Earle School. For many years she was a member of the Westport Historical Commission and the Community Preservation Committee. In 2004, Norma created the Westport History Work Group that shared the enjoyment of local history stories. Her commitment to history led to her recognition as Westport Woman of the Year in 2011.

One of Norma’s greatest achievements was the creation of the History Room at the Westport Library. It is a wonderful place to research local history, with everything in clearly marked folders and indexed to make it accessible to other researchers. Following in the footsteps of Eleanor Tripp, Norma dedicated much of her life to uncovering the town’s history, and making it easier for others to continue their work.

## HOW WESTPORT BECAME A TOWN

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who bid for their care and were reimbursed by the town. This system remained in place until the town poor farm was established in 1824.

In choosing the Town Meeting form of government, Westport simply adopted the familiar system used in Dartmouth —after all, they had not rebelled against unjust government, they simply wanted local control and convenience. The first town meeting was held August 20, 1787 at the home of William Gifford, where the Moderator, Selectmen, Town Clerk, Treasurer, and Assessor were elected. A tax collector and several constables were chosen, with no salary; instead they were paid 3 percent of what they collected. Over the years the percentage varied between 2 percent and 5 percent —an awkward system that nonetheless stayed in effect until 1935.

A large part of the town budget went to the Surveyors of Highways—12 in all. The Surveyors were responsible for repairing all town roads and clearing snow. All citizens were required to pay cash, provide labor, or supply oxen, horses, or carts for road repair. There is no record of whether those who chose to remain Dartmouth citizens still had to pay Westport highway taxes.

Some of the elected or appointed positions in town government would now sound strange. Fence Viewers inspected fences and resolved disputes between neighbors. Everyone kept animals, and a hog could ruin a neighbor’s vegetable garden in no time. Fences, it was said, must be “horse high and hog tight.” There are still three Fence Viewers in Westport today.

Westport’s agricultural heritage is evident in the roles of Pound Keeper and Hog Reeve, and its maritime legacy is apparent in the Culler [inspector] of Dried Fish. The most interestingly-named position was Searcher and Packer of Pickled Pork and Beef. Because Westport shipped a great deal of barreled fish and meat to the West Indies, this official, along with the Culler of Hoops and Staves, insured the quality of exports.

One final position in town government was the Tythingman. In colonial Massachusetts this had been a church-related role: getting people to go to church and poking them with a long stick if they fell asleep. By the time Westport became a town, the role had become more general: “to inform of all idle and disorderly persons, profane swearers or cursers, Sabbath breakers or the like offenders, to the intent that they may be punished.” They were the town’s moral police.

Westport had two Tythingmen in 1787. A few years later there were four. By 1806 there were apparently a lot more disorderly, swearing, Sabbath breakers in town, as the number was raised to 10. And by 1823 it had shot up to 15. Westport had become a moral swamp! But, happily, since 1836 there have been no Tythingmen in Westport, for which we can all breathe a sigh of relief.

And that’s how Westport became a town.

# Support LOCAL HISTORY!

The Westport Historical Society is supported by donations from individuals, foundations and businesses who care about preserving the special heritage of Westport. In addition to joining the Historical Society as a member, please consider these other ways you can support our mission:

**CONTRIBUTIONS IN HONOR OR MEMORIAL GIFTS**  
Honor a friend or relative, commemorate a special anniversary or mark the passing of a loved one with a contribution.

**BEQUESTS**  
Leave a lasting legacy for the future by naming the Historical Society as a beneficiary in your will.

**CORPORATE MATCHING GIFTS**  
Please check with your employer to see if they offer a matching gift program.

**BUSINESS SPONSORSHIPS**  
The Historical Society offers local businesses many different levels of sponsorship and recognition.

# Thank you TO OUR BUSINESSES MEMBERS FOR THEIR SUPPORT:

- Attorney Dorothy P. Tongue P.C.
- Baycoast Bank
- Bradshaw Insurance
- Country Woolens
- Comfort of Touch
- Credit Card Reviews
- Drift Workroom Custom Sewing for Interiors
- Even Keel Realty
- Gray’s Daily Grind and Gray’s Gristmill
- Geraldine Millham Design
- Jack’s Landscaping and Lawn Service
- Lees Market
- Lees Wine and Spirits
- Partners Village Store
- Partners Insurance Group
- Potter Funeral Home
- Sisters of Solace
- Slocum Design Studio
- Tim’s Lawn Care
- T.F. Morra Tree Care
- Village Plumbing



## RECENT ACQUISITIONS

*The following are some highlights of recent acquisitions. We are very grateful to all who have entrusted us with these gifts:*

**2015.032 GEORGE AND PATRICIA DEAN**  
Collection of scrapbooks containing newspaper clippings dating from 1920-1950s.

**2015.038 JUDY LEPREAU KELLER**  
Dr. True’s Elixir bottle.

**2015.043 CECILE DENADEL**  
Photographs of the Westport trolley.

**2016.001 NANCY MAILHOT**  
Osborne’s meat juice press.

**2016.002 BRUCE WILD**  
Genealogy of Wild-Williston-Manchester-Chase families.

**2016.003 TONY AND SHARON CONNORS**  
Rotary telephone.

**2016.004 JIM AND BARBARA FARIA**  
Russell family genealogy, daguerreotype of Caroline H. Howland, Book “Witnessing, A Concise Account of a Marvelous Event with its Happy Results in the Life of Phebe Slocum.”

**2016.007 PETER MEGGISON**  
Postcards: Chateau Motel on route 177 and St. George Church, North Westport.

**2016.008 ELAINE OSTROFF**  
Documentation of Central Village sidewalk project.

**2016.009 ROBERT AND NAOKO KUGLER**  
Accounts of the Schooner Albert owned by Isaac Cory, 1820s.  
Newspaper clippings documenting the trial of John Baker.

WESTPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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## CALENDAR OF **upcoming** EVENTS



### WINTER HISTORY FORUM

*The first Thursday of each month  
November – March, 10am*

**At the Paquachuck Inn, 2056 Main Rd,  
Westport Point**

An informal history group, open to all. Each program includes one or two topics relating to local history, ongoing research, or personal reminiscences. Refreshments will be served. Suggested donation \$5.

### WESTPORT HISTORY 101

*Saturday, April 2, 9, 16, 10am*

**At the Paquachuck Inn, 2056 Main Rd,  
Westport Point**

Besides Westport's incorporation in 1787, how much do you really know about our sleepy little town? Lexington, Concord and even New Bedford may have grabbed all the historic headlines, but Westport has a rich past of whaling and fishing, farming, manufacturing, immigration and even tourism that has contributed to the fabric of the SouthCoast region. Beginning April 2 on three consecutive Saturday mornings, Westport Historical Society President Tony Connors will lead us on a fascinating journey through Westport's history. He'll begin with the glaciers that influenced the town's development then travel through time until the decline of the town's manufacturing base in the early 20th century. Suggested donation \$5.