



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

HARBINGER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WESTPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY www.wpthistory.org

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Summer 2022

Don't forget to renew your membership!

"We had May basket parties a lot when I was small. One night, we had twenty-one May baskets. They put fruit and candy and all kinds of stuff in them. They'd bring them to your doorstep and then run away. It was sort of like hide and seek."

Milton Borden

Do you recall the tradition of May baskets? Westport's old-timers have fond memories of this almost forgotten custom. Hand-made paper or cardboard baskets, filled with small treats and trinkets, were hung on a neighbor's door as a gift. It was a May time tradition that celebrated life in a close-knit community, neighborly familiarity, and friendship, as well as the changing seasons.

The power of a strong sense of community has been keenly felt during these past two years. We hope you believe that the Historical Society has played an important role in supporting that sense -- offering at all seasons the equivalent of a "May basket" of treats and experiences to strengthen ties and keep old customs alive. We now ask you, as we do each year, to reciprocate with your "May basket" of renewed membership.

With our major project to rehabilitate the Bell School finally getting underway and a move to new temporary headquarters at the Westport Town Farm, the Historical Society continues to embrace necessary changes and overcome challenges to improve our ability to care for our collection and transform the Bell School into a valued and relevant community resource.

We are most appreciative of the many individuals who have already renewed their membership. One quarter of our operating income is generated by membership renewals so your continued support has a great impact!

You can renew on our website www.wpthistory.org.

Thank you for your support!



Lizzie Russell, Sherman Collection



Don't forget to save your Lees Market receipts and bring them to the Westport Historical Society. Lees Market generously donates **1%** of the total receipt value. You can drop them off at the Bell School or bring them to a historical society program.



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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.

Don't forget to save your Lees Market receipts and bring or mail them to the Westport Historical Society. Lees Market generously donates 1% of the total receipt value. Please mail receipts to our office.

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A Treasure Trove of North Westport History

After crisscrossing the country from Westport to Alaska and back again, an extraordinary collection of materials relating to the history of North Westport has arrived at the Westport Historical Society. The Sherman family collection includes deeds, correspondence, photographs, maps, and journals that will significantly enrich our understanding of the far northern parts of Westport in the 19th century.

According to Michael Labossiere, Superintendent of the Watuppa Reservation and local history expert, this collection is the "Rosetta stone" that connects many missing links in tracing the evolution of Blossom Road, Old Bedford Road, Watuppa Reservation and the former Indian reservation.

Genealogists will find a treasure trove of information about the Sherman, Blossom, Young, Borden, Pettey and Macomber families. These families are connected by marriage as well as by proximity, many living in neighboring houses along Blossom Road. As was typical in 19th century Westport, children grew up to marry neighbors and lived next to or near their parents, building a closely interconnected community with strong familial ties to each other and to their properties. The collection also sheds light on the presence of Native American families such as the Perry and Mingo families.

There are also some unexpected treasures among the documents such as the license plate for a Model M Cadillac purchased in 1907, kept in a file along with a photo of the car and sales receipt for \$950.

According to Philip Rulon, the donor of the collection, the Shermans were "meticulous journalists and conservators." This collection demonstrates an awareness and appreciation of their own heritage as farmers as well as a reverence for the pedigree of land ownership.

"At first glance, the materials are unassuming and ordinary, but taken as a whole, this collection is extremely valuable and comprehensive," Jenny O'Neill, Westport Historical Society Executive Director commented. "It is fortunate that the donor recognized the historical value of this collection. We do know that often these kinds of collections find their way to the dump rather than to an archive."

Descended from Philip Sherman who settled in Portsmouth, RI in 1634, the Shermans were a prominent Westport family, notable for "living a life of usefulness, industry and purity." They are remembered as being well educated, active in town government and involved with the Watuppa Grange and North Westport Christian Church. However, like many other Westport farmers of the 19th century, they were also adventurous and well-traveled mariners. The collection includes a first-hand account by Albert Sherman of his voyage on a clipper ship "Around Cape Horn." His son, Waldo Sherman, made 22 Atlantic crossings, four of them on square rigged vessels.

The collection has been catalogued and is available to researchers either by in person visits or through the historical society's online database, www.wpthistory.org/collection.



Susie Blossom, Sherman Collection

Philip Rulon, donor of the Sherman collection, reflects on the process of organizing and preserving the collection:

The journey that put the Sherman legacy in your hands began a very long time ago. I suspect that the first person to take the records seriously was Wilson Sherman, who lasted long enough to have a photograph taken. A copy of that photo is with you now.

Wilson built the house at 122 Blossom Rd. Wilson was married to Mary Davis, of the Davis family that farmed in North Westport about a mile from the Sherman homestead. They had three sons, Jonathan, Abiel, and Albert. Jonathan and Abiel died young, one in his teens and the other in his early twenties.

Albert went to sea for several years in his early twenties. He was frugal in his lifestyle and saved enough to return to Blossom Road and build the house at 111 Blossom Road. Albert was a significant player in the retention of family records. Albert's wife was also named Mary and hailed from the Russell clan of South Dartmouth. They had two sons, Wilson, who died in infancy in 1872, and Waldo, my Great Grandfather, 1880-1964.

Waldo was an early graduate of the Mass Maritime Academy. He gained a commission in the Navy and made many trips on square rigged ships. Waldo was also a committed archivist. He married Mary Ella Blossom, daughter of Eli Walter Blossom, a dairy farmer (187 Blossom Rd.) They had two sons, Wilson and Wendell, my grandfather.

When 111 Blossom Road was sold after Wilson's death my mother had all the records moved across the street, into the barn at 122 Blossom Road. Before moving to Alaska, I did a major re-sort and reduction in that barn.

The barn clean out went on for weeks in the summer of 2001. I was working alone on it. I examined every leaf of paper I encountered, some of it strewn about on the floors in half rotten cardboard boxes. There was also significant intermingling with records from my father's family, also a considerable cache.

I refined everything into two large file cabinets. I spoke to an old friend, Bob Melody, from my Westport days. He agreed to retrieve the cabinets and pallet them for shipment to Alaska. I had a trucking company pick them up at Bob's place of work and haul them to Fredericksburg, Texas, where the company I work for has a station. They then went on a jet to Fairbanks.

Fortunately, I had rented a small hangar on the airport where I live. Lots of folding tables were set up and the files were again sorted, leaf by leaf. We owe thanks to Bob Melody for the rescue mission. As for my own contribution, it was mostly sorting, but also adding whatever meta-data that I could from my 60+ years of listening to family lore.



Ruth Wordell, Sherman Collection



Jane Sherman Wordell, Sherman Collection



What's in store for Bell School?

This spring, the Bell School was lifted 4 feet in the air to allow for repairs to the foundation

You may have noticed some significant activity is taking place at the Bell School. This project marks the beginning of a multi-phase effort to address structural weaknesses and to transform the Bell School into a resource that is more relevant to the community of Westport and better suited to the current needs of the Historical Society.

Our vision for the future of the Bell School is as a “history center” — a hybrid space combining elements of a visitor/information center/museum/library — offering resources for residents/researchers/tourists to learn more about Westport’s history and providing space and a stable environment for preserving our collection of historical archives and objects.

The most significant outcomes of the project will be:

- A dedicated and expanded storage for our collection of archives and objects by fully utilizing the basement and second floor.
- A welcoming and comfortable visitor center on the first floor providing access to research facilities and interpretive displays.
- Securing the structural integrity of this historic building for many years to come.

Project scope

Phase 1 Vital repairs to the foundation are currently underway. Completion is expected by summer 2022. **This phase is fully funded.**

Phase 2 Interior and exterior rehabilitation including the creation of collections storage, finishing of the basement, improved facilities for visitors, and reconstruction of the addition at the rear of the building.

The Westport Historical Society received a Community Preservation Act grant of \$350,000 which will form the “keystone” for a broader fundraising campaign in the coming months.

Will this project alter the exterior appearance of the Bell School?

Our project will not alter the visible exterior of the Bell School. The most significant alteration takes place at the rear of the building with the reconstruction of the stage addition on the existing footprint, adding a second floor to provide access

Our vision will be achieved through thoughtful space planning in the following ways:

- Reconstruction of the failing “stage addition” at the rear of the Bell School and repurposed to house a small office and to accommodate a stairway connecting basement, first floor and second floor.
- Finishing and waterproofing the basement for storage purposes.
- Creation of archival storage on the second floor.
- New mechanical systems
- A welcoming public entrance
- Handicap accessible restroom
- Refreshed layout of the public space on the first floor

How will this project improve the Historical Society’s ability to preserve the collection of historical documents and artifacts?

The Westport Historical Society cares for a growing collection of historical objects and archives, reflecting Westport’s heritage as an agricultural and maritime community. The collection is well documented and catalogued, encompassing photographs, postcards, documents, scrapbooks, maps, paintings, clothing, textiles, archaeological artifacts and furniture.

Currently, the WHS is unable to meet basic museum standards for the physical care and management of this collection. Much of the collection was stored in the most vulnerable part of the building, the small addition located at the rear of the building. This part of the structure which houses a small performing stage, was added in 1907. A key goal of our project is to create dedicated archival and collections storage with appropriate mechanical systems and expanded space by fully utilizing the basement and the second floor.

What are the proposed amenities for visitors?

By reimagining the use of the first floor, the Bell School will be transformed into an engaging community resource, providing a more dynamic and welcoming visitor experience. The reconfigured public space on the first floor will offer:

- Small-scale, changing displays of historical objects.
- Resources for researchers including most commonly used documents, maps, photos.
- A comfortable community documentation space for promoting interaction and engagement with visitors, for example conducting oral history interviews.
- Space for processing and cataloging the collection by volunteers and staff.
- An audio-visual/technology component to present educational content about the history of Westport.
- By relocating the office and research facilities on the first floor, staff will be able to more easily assist and interact with visitors.

Where is the Historical Society’s office currently located?

Our office is relocated at the Westport Town Farm, 830 Drift Road.

REVISITING THE STORY OF THE



WESTPORT TOWN FARM

Westport Town Farm, c. 1900

The Westport Historical Society has a temporary new home on the second floor of the Town Farm while the Bell School undergoes repair and rehabilitation. Although it is hard to ignore the irony of ending up at the Poor Farm, we are extremely comfortable in the beautifully restored Willcox house with its expansive views to the river. Our time in this temporary new home also provides an opportunity to revisit the history of the Town Farm and to refresh our understanding of its significance.

The concurrent survival of a collection of preserved buildings and landscape with a deep and rich documentary record makes this topic especially attractive for research. The town farm was a focus of research for two notable local historians/preservationists, Geraldine Millham and Martha Guy. Fortunately, some of their work was captured in video recordings of public programs in which they presented their research. Their work is given further context by the comprehensive survey “The Poorhouses of Massachusetts” by Heli Meltsner, and by an unpublished thesis “Residence, Not Confinement” by Joshua Loyal Stewart, presenting findings of a 2012 archaeological dig which offers some unexpected insights into daily life at the town farm.

My goal is to share the wide spectrum of primary source material relating to the town farm, an archive that provides hints of life stories of hardship, sickness, mental illness and addiction as well as demonstrating “a strict regard to the principle of humanity and kindness toward that unfortunate class of our population.” The recently digitized town historical documents include the almshouse register, reports of the Overseers of the Poor, correspondence between towns regarding settlement of paupers, town farm accounts, and town meeting records. The Westport Historical Society has two collections of photographs relating to the town farm, including photos taken by Westport photographer David Allen and a collection documenting the building in the 1970s when it operated as a private rest home, Dea Rest.

“Over the hill to the poor house”

*Over the hill to the poor-house - me child’rn dear, good-by!
Many a night I’ve watched you when only God was nigh;
And God’ll judge between us; but I will al’ays pray
That you shall never suffer the half I do today.*

Will Carleton, 1904

1. To Charles B. for...	1-2-3
2. To James B. for...	1-12-0
3. To John B. for...	0-6-6
4. To William B. for...	0-5-7
5. To John B. for...	1-12-0
6. To John B. for...	0-6-6
7. To John B. for...	0-5-7
8. To John B. for...	1-12-0
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99. To John B. for...	0-6-6
100. To John B. for...	0-5-7

Accounts from the Town Farm

A note about nomenclature

Terminology for sites that cared for the poor and infirm varied considerably. The Westport Town Farm has been known as the poor farm / town farm / almshouse / Infirmary. For most of the 19th century, Westport town records use the term "almshouse." Today, it is known as Westport Town Farm. Town farms are also referred to as the asylum, poorhouse and workhouse.

The term "settlement" refers to an individual's right to claim support from a particular town.

- A man derived his settlement from the town where he had paid taxes or owned land.
- A woman derived her settlement from her husband or father.
- Children followed the settlement of their father.

Pauper management prior to the Town Farm

Concern for the poor and elderly in 19th century Westport is one of the dominant themes of the town records, and was one of the main responsibilities of the selectmen. Prior to the town farm, individual townspeople would take in the poor, elderly and sick, a system known as venduing, when the town accepted bids for the care of paupers as illustrated by minutes of the town meeting in 1795:

"Voted that the Select Men be directed to fix on the time and place when and where they will meet, to vendue or dispose of the poor of this town, for the year ensuing to that person or persons that will keep them the cheapest on such conditions and restrictions as the Select Men shall there agree upon."

In 1801, the system was altered to allow for one individual to take in all the town's paupers:

"Voted that John Gifford take all the poor of the town of Westport for one year to support them comfortably in sickness and in health and to pay all necessary doctor's bills... to find bedding, cloathing ... if any of the poor shall die before the twentieth day of May next, then said Gifford is only to receive a sum for their expense in proportion [to] the time they shall live ... the said poor persons to be under the care and inspection of the select men, to see that they are comfortably provided for."

What was life like at the almshouse?

In 1824, the town voted to purchase the Wilcox farm (built c. 1720) and repurpose it as an almshouse. For 125 years this site was home to Westport's "poor, intemperate, insane, and elderly." The "family model" of the poor farm not only provided its residents with accommodation, meals, and healthcare, but was also designed to encourage a sense of community, and indirectly, to facilitate moral rehabilitation.



Interior view of Dea Rest (Town Farm), c. 1950



Interior view of Dea Rest (Town Farm), c. 1950

The family model of the poor farm is reflected in the daily management by a warden (or superintendent) and the matron, often a husband-and-wife team, whose children would also participate in the management of people and facilities.

The superintendent, often with help from his sons and with participation of the inmates, managed the farm activities. Records show that the town farm had dairy cows, pigs, poultry, grain and vegetables. Hay and salt-hay created the largest percentage of annual income.

By the late 19th century, the farm had become comparatively productive. It sold eggs from 222 chickens, milk from 7 cows, meat from pigs in addition to the subsistence farming of vegetables and crops.

The matron was responsible for the housework, managing meals and some healthcare, often with the assistance of her daughters. She was the “mother figure” of what the Overseers of the Poor referred to as “the family circle” of that institution. Her charges also included orphans and young truants who attended the short-lived “farm school.”

The town hired a local doctor to provide more skilled medical attention. Those with more serious mental illness were moved to the state-run mental asylum in Taunton. Annual state inspections give us a glimpse of conditions within the almshouse:

Annual Report of the State Board of Charity

WESTPORT Population 2,928. Inspected July 24 1913. Warden Aaron Besse, matron Mrs Besse salary 400 served here seven months. Warden has six rooms. One room with one bed set apart for hospital use. One sitting room. Nine sleeping rooms with nine beds. One bath room without direct supply of water. Two privies. Heating by steam. Lighting by oil. Ten tramps during year separated from other inmates, lodged, fed, required to work one hour at wood pile. Forty five acres of land, one half an acre ploughed, sixteen acres tilled. Chief products milk and vegetables. Valuation of almshouse property \$1,505.18 Total annual cost \$1,213.90 net \$986.22.

“The possibility of fondness”

An archaeological dig conducted in 2012 uncovered some discoveries that challenge our assumptions about the town farm and its “inmates.” Presenting the findings in a thesis titled “Residence, Not Confinement,” Joshua Stewart questions whether the town farm was a place of confinement and control such as a prison or asylum. He suggests that the evidence might indicate that it was a place of refuge, regarded as part of the town, not other than, “making the most of it in a world of sparse charity.” Stewart considers the unique nature of small town farms, which clearly had little in common with the large city workhouses and state level mental institutions.

The dig uncovered a large amount of ammunition, indicating the presence of seven firearms, most likely used for hunting during the Great Depression. According to Stewart, this is further evidence of a shift in the town farm’s role from providing support for the poor, insane and intemperate to caring exclusively for an elderly (and less dangerous) population.

The dig also uncovered objects of personal adornment, including 19 buttons which provide some further clues about the nature of the poor farm. Among the collection is a hard rubber button worn for 18 years before being discarded, indicative of long-term thrifty retention of clothing. The dig also uncovered a bronze button made in the UK for the US military, retained and perhaps repurposed by a resident. Cumulatively, the small finds suggest “a community with social distinction, personal identity, and diversity rather than one of institutional similarity.”

Conditions within the almshouse were well documented and publicized through the annual reports by the Overseers of the Poor. They sought to “promote a just and sound economy in that department of our Town affairs, and at the same time have a strict regard to the principle of humanity and kindness toward that unfortunate class of our population.”



Exterior view of Dea Rest (Town Farm), c. 1950

Benevolence was demonstrated in 1879 by Mr. A. R. Gifford who “made the hearts glad of the inmates of the almshouse, by furnishing them a Turkey Dinner on Thanksgiving day.”

The Almshouse Inmates

The number of paupers at the town farm fluctuated over the decades:

1840 -- 37 paupers

1880 -- 11 paupers

1930 -- 7 paupers

The almshouse register notes the reason and date for departure. Many were simply discharged, but other reasons included:

- Went to live with another individual
- Went to work for another individual
- Ran away
- Walked away
- Sentenced for being a common drunkard
- Sentenced for 3 months for neglecting to provide for family
- Illegitimate baby taken by family member
- Committed to Taunton Hospital
- Buried by his friends
- Returned to their family home

The following notes are included among the lists of names and dates in the almshouse register

1859 Remarks on Paupers

Samuel Wordell - lived and died a batchelor and was worth in the best of his days about two thousand dollars.

Zira Wordell was insane about six years prior to his death, was the son of Tabor Wordell - lived due north from Abial Davis.

Richard Macomber, an old batchelor loves rum better than food came here by drinking to much; is the brother of Varnam Macomber, a shoemaker at Westport Point.

William Macomber brother of Johnathan to married three times had some children, all dead but one and that he don't know where he is."

Town farm historian Martha Guy has delved further into the stories of three town farm residents, illustrating three contrasting personal circumstances, each leading to the almshouse. You can watch her presentation at <https://vimeo.com/483229833> and <https://vimeo.com/479870723>.



Interior view of Dea Rest (Town Farm), c. 1950



Town Farm historian Martha Guy examines archives at the Westport Town Hall

To summarize her research:

Illness

Judith Thompson born in Middleborough, married Westporter, David Thompson. They settled in Westport, building a house at 588 Gifford Road. However, by 1846, they experienced financial troubles leading to foreclosure. Judith returned to her family home in Middleborough and David left for the California gold fields. By 1859 Judith was confined to her bed, suffering from a debilitating illness and her husband was no longer able to support her. Following a lengthy interchange of correspondence to establish her settlement in Westport, she was transported from her brother's residence in Middleborough to the Westport almshouse, as her brother was no longer able to care for her. She spends the rest of her life, 13 years, at the town farm. When she arrived, there were 23 residents at the town farm. Among them:

- Freeloze Tallman, noted as having a deformity
- Eunice Tripp, aged 77, insane
- Lucy Gifford, aged 34, insane
- Caroline Pettey, idiotic
- Sarah Fish with 3 boys aged 14, 5 and 1 ½ years
- Ruth Sowle, aged 14
- Several Crocker children under the age of 10, no parents listed

References to the “insane” and “idiotic” appear frequently in the almshouse records, but, as Martha Guy points out, they were “subjective categories” rather than medical evaluations.

Addiction

Born in 1793, Ramon (Raymond, Raimon, Raman) Castino, was the eldest of eight children. His father, a wealthy man, died in 1810 and Ramon was appointed as the executor of his will. Although Ramon discharged all outstanding debts, there are indications that he suffered from various addictions. In 1812, Ramon submitted a sizable bill of 32 dollars to the probate court for attending and furnishing liquor at the auction of his father's sloop. The account books kept by Dr. James Handy show that Ramon received repeated doses of opium. By 1845, Ramon was admitted to the almshouse as a pauper where he died in 1861. His life is succinctly described in the almshouse register: “Ramon Castano - was married - and was once a welthy man, he lost his property by forgery & drinking - he has no children.”

Orphaned

Born in 1840, Caroline Tallman was identified in the census as a “mulatto.” Her mother was Betsy Tallman, her father was unknown. By 1842, Caroline had been admitted to the almshouse as an orphan where she remained until the age of 15. In 1859, she was taken to live at the Head of Westport with a former almshouse warden Thomas J. Allen and his wife. The census lists her occupation as “milliner.” The household moved to Dartmouth but, by 1859, correspondence between Dartmouth/Westport Overseers of the Poor suggests that she was once again destitute and no longer a member of the Allen household. Martha Guy noted that by 1859, Caroline had married Abraham Maxfield of Dartmouth and by 1870 she lived with her husband and five children in New Bedford. Several questions remain. Was Caroline of Native American descent as suggested by the identification as a “mulatto”? What caused her destitution in 1862? What was her fate -- continued stability as suggested by her marriage or a return to the poor house?

Long-term residents

Although most residents passed through the doors of the almshouse for a brief time, there was a core group of individuals who remained in the almshouse for decades:

- Lurana Manchester, admitted in 1841, noted as being deaf and dumb, Lurana spent the next 50 years at the town farm. She is listed as a pauper at the town farm in 1899.
- Caroline Pettey admitted 1841 at the age of 32, remaining there until 1899.
- Lucy Gifford, admitted 1857, remaining there until her death in 1898.



The tramp house at the Town Farm

Over the years, this group shared the sitting room and took meals together. Several of these individuals left the almshouse briefly, possibly staying with family members. With a population of about 2,000, 19th century Westport was a small close-knit community, and it is likely that many of the almshouse residents had family members nearby who for various reasons were unable or unwilling to care for them.

Tramps and travelers

The tramp house (or carriage shed) stands to the north of the main town farm building. It provided a separate lodging space for transients in a room with barred windows and a heavy oak door. The tramp, as an able bodied but homeless person, traveling from town to town begging for private charity, was in a sense the opposite of a pauper with legal settlement in a community (Heli Meltsner). Some tramps may have been returning Civil War soldiers, others “rode the rails” of the newly constructed network of railroads.

Milton Borden, interviewed in 1976, recalls a few details about these individuals:

“In my younger days, what stands out in Westport was what some people call them—tramps, and some people call them hoboes. I was about five years old in 1908. In fact, they used to come down and travel from town to town—Little Compton, Dartmouth, and Westport; and I was very much interested because, at that time there was what they used to call the “town farm,” because in the law, they had to be put up to two or three days at a time—if they stayed any longer, they were forced to work. They never got any money.

What was the Westport Town Farm? That’s where they stayed and they had little places where they stayed. ... The shed was where the tramps lived. The difference between the tramps and the hoboes was that the hoboes were classed a little higher. After I got a little older, I could tell the difference myself. You could tell the difference between the two – they could always tell the difference.

Time hasn’t changed anything. Today there’s people on the road who you might call tramps.”

Tramps were generally feared by townspeople as recounted by Marianna Macomber:

“Another fear especially in the spring was of meeting tramps. These stragglers having spent the winter under cover began to travel the country roads. Many women began to keep doors locked as I was not the only one who feared them. The farmers dreaded them too, as they would often go into a barn after dark to sleep on the hay causing a fire hazard. For this reason the town maintained a tramp house at the Town Farm. By getting a permit from the Overseers of the Poor a tramp could have a bed and breakfast. Since my father was on the Board, just at dusk of a spring evening in May or June, the two worst months, it was a frequent occurrence for a tramp to appear at the door for a permit, but at any time of day they might come along asking for food.”



Geraldine Millham spearheaded Town Farm preservation efforts

As noted in the almshouse register, many tramps arrived “with a Good Share of Lice.” They received crackers, cheese, salt fish, water, and accommodation in a sparsely furnished shed, supplied with mattresses, quilts, wood, candles, and matches. By law, tramps were required to work in return for bed and board. Not surprisingly tramps were known to run away before completing the so called “work test.”

The almshouse register also records the presence of “travelers” -- providing their full name, age, residence, complexion and height. Their presence implies that the almshouse was used as an inn for short stays. Many of these travelers came from Ireland, England, Scotland and even as far as Denmark. Some may have been mill workers traveling between Fall River, New Bedford, and Lowell.

The Infirmary and Dea Rest

“The town farm closed when the need for it had disappeared.” (Joshua Stewart) Nevertheless, Westport is notable for being one of the last towns, by many decades, to close their poor farm. The establishment of the Social Security Act eventually brought change to the town farm. By 1930, the poor farm had become a place to house the elderly, known as The Infirmary. The Overseers of the Poor were renamed as The Board of Public Welfare.

In 1956, the town voted to approve the permanent closing of the Infirmary, and approved the lease to Mrs. Dorothy Hathaway “so that she may operate it as a home for the aged or convalescent persons.” It became known as Dea Rest. A collection of photographs of the interior and exterior show immaculately furnished rooms with communal-style living and dining rooms.

Town Farm Preservation Effort

By 1978 Dea Rest had become a “white elephant for the town.” The proprietor failed to pay rent, and there were worries about the building’s safety in the event of a fire. The selectmen considered renting it to large families from Fall River or for use by the Council on Aging but the expense of rehabilitation and the need to meet fire safety requirements remained an obstacle.

Recognizing the historical value of the property and fearing for its future, Geraldine Millham sought to save the property from demolition and development. Working under the auspices of the Westport Historical Commission with Pete Baker and Steven Delano (WHC chair), she proposed a scheme to preserve the town farm by creating self-financing rental apartments. Newspaper articles recount the “emotional controversy” to restore the Town Farm in 1980 which met with some resistance at the town meeting. “The property has given us nothing but trouble, it should have been torn down,” commented one town meeting participant.

However, after much debate, town meeting voted to support the project. Shouldering the responsibility for the ongoing care and management of the property, Geraldine succeeded in making the town farm self-supporting through rental income.

By 2006, the town farm had entered a new lease of life under the management of The Trustees of Reservations. The buildings were restored, transformed into offices and a meeting space for TTOR and the Westport Land Conservation Trust. The surrounding land became the site of a productive community farming project, producing over 2300 pounds of fresh vegetable and fruit.

The utilization of the land and buildings continues to evolve. Today it is a popular destination for walkers (and their dogs). The open landscape and cleared fields, delineated by stone walls, offer stunning views to the river -- a quintessential Westport experience combining fascinating stories of past lives, historic architecture and natural harmony. Fortunately, its story is deeply enriched by the documentary evidence that has survived long after the last inmate passed away.

Jenny O'Neill, Executive Director, Westport Historical Society

Handy House Heritage Trail News

Although the history of Native Americans in this region has been documented from an archaeological perspective, it is not well represented in public spaces from a contemporary Native American perspective. Acknowledging a need to improve our understanding of the Native American heritage and enduring presence in this region, Westport Historical Society worked with Elizabeth James Perry, an enrolled member of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head –Aquinnah, to create a new installation along the Handy House Heritage trail.

As a member of a Nation that has lived on and harvested the sea since ancient times, Elizabeth's is a perspective that combines coastal Algonquian culture, traditional beliefs and science in her ways of relating to the North Atlantic. She is a multi-medium traditional and contemporary artist. The signage presents perspectives on Native cuisine, travel and trade, fauna and flora and tribal architecture.

Special thanks to Ray Shaw and to Charley Appleton for their assistance with this project!

This project was funded by The Island Foundation and by the Westport Cultural Council.

The Handy House Heritage Trail is located at 202 Hix Bridge Road and is open dawn to dusk every day

Westport Gravestone Cleaning and Restoration Group

Laura Oliveira, a leader in the Westport Gravestone Cleaning and Restoration Group and a trained gravestone restorer, reflects on a recent heartbreaking discovery at Beech Grove cemetery:

Imagine the pain of having a still born child and then multiply that pain four times over. Troy Rebello, Todd Baptista, Jaimie Rebello and I discovered four tiny stones buried in section B1, plot 50 at Beech Grove. As we dug we discovered and leveled a shared marble base, then cleaned and re-attached the four tiny stones to the base. The inscriptions are identical: Infant child of ED and SR Mosher.

Plot 50 in Section B1 was purchased by Emmanuel Mosher, a blacksmith born in Westport in 1847. He was first married to Mary Hart Mosher and together they had five children - Clarence, George, Linnie, Mary and Ardelee. The couple would divorce in the early 1890s. Four of the adult Mosher children were buried in the family plot at Beech Grove and Linnie was buried with her mother in New Bedford. In 1894, Emmanuel married Sylvia Reed who was born in Dartmouth in 1864. The couple suffered the loss of the four unnamed children and did not have any surviving children. The couple lived at 15 Bourne Street in New Bedford, a house that still stands today next to Buttonwood Park. Emmanuel died in 1923 and Sylvia lived alone in the home until her death in 1942.

There was no record of these stones in the Cemetery Identification Group website and it was our honor to record the graves and tell the story of Emmanuel and Sylvia's four infants.

Join the effort! Volunteers are welcome! Connect to the Facebook group or contact Todd Baptista at trbent@charter.net or Betty Slade at dcolebslade@aol.com to receive updates via email.



CALENDAR OF EVENTS

SUMMER/FALL 2022



The Handy House is open every Saturday June 18 – Sep 24, 2022.
Guided tours at 11 AM. Check our website for updates and for additional special events throughout the summer.

A Wedding Dress Retrospective

Handy House
202 Hix Bridge Road, Westport MA
10 AM – 4 PM
June 18 – Sep 24
Exhibition open every Saturday

Tour the exhibition with Blair Walker, curator and clothing historian and learn more about how to care for historic clothing and textiles.

2 PM Saturday June 18
2 PM Saturday July 23
2 PM Saturday August 20

Kids Make History

Handy House
202 Hix Bridge Road, Westport MA
9 AM – 11 AM
Every Wednesday
July 13 – August 17
Drop in for some creative crafts, traditional games and scavenger hunt! Activities take place outside under a tent. Also a family-friendly time to explore the Handy House! FREE!



Woolly Mammoth StoryWalk

Handy House Heritage Trail
Open dawn – dusk, every day
July/August
This Storywalk features the children's book "Wild and Woolly Mammoths" by Alike. Travel back thousands of years to explore the exciting world of woolly mammoths and come face to face with a life-size baby woolly mammoth!

Polish Families of Westport Get-Together

Handy House
202 Hix Bridge Road, Westport MA
10 AM Saturday August 6
An opportunity to share stories and information about the many local families with Polish roots.

Meet a Blacksmith

Handy House
202 Hix Bridge Road, Westport MA
4 PM - 7 PM
Third Tuesday of the month May - October
(Rain date third Wednesday)
Generations of blacksmiths have lived at the Handy House beginning with William White, the first resident of the house in the early 1700s. His tools were passed down

from one generation to the next. Meet a modern-day blacksmith, Kyle Duarte, for a hands-on demonstration of blacksmith techniques. Drop-in any time between 4 PM - 7 PM - June 21, July 19, August 16

Paul Cuffe Performance

7 PM Friday September 9

Shattuck Gallery

A workshop performance of scenes from an original play by Samuel Harps, based on the life of Captain Paul Cuffe.

Handy House Artisan Fair and Vintage Market

10 AM - 3 PM Saturday September 17, 2022 (rain date Sep 18)

202 Hix Bridge Road, Westport MA

The Handy House Artisan Fair showcases many local craftspeople who specialize in skills and traditional crafts commonly practiced in the 18th and 19th-century. This year's fair also features a vintage wares market – an opportunity to pick up unusual antiques, postcards, jewelry and textiles. The Artisan Fair offers a rare opportunity to meet local craftspeople and learn about their skills through hands-on demonstrations.

Further information on the Vintage Market

Do you have an attic full of treasures that need a new home? Why not consider participating in our Vintage Market! This opportunity is open to anyone in the community. Tent and tables provided. We ask for a donation of \$60 (WHS Members) or \$80 (non-members) to cover the cost of the tent/tables/chairs. Contact Westport Historical Society to reserve your spot!

Coming up in October:

Cemetery Tour

Saturday October 8, 2022

A chance to explore a few of Westport's historic cemeteries, and a fundraiser for the historical society. Tickets and further details will be available on our website www.wpthistory.org.

Get ready for Halloween!

Walk the Handy House Halloween Trail open for the month of October. Make your own magic spells, wands and more unique historically-themed Halloween crafts and family activities offered on select Saturdays in October.

Ongoing

Join the Westport gravestone cleaning and restoration group. Connect with their facebook group or contact the historical society to sign up for email updates.

Westport History Tours

Explore the Head of Westport and the Handy House Heritage Trail with our mobile app offers two walking tours. Visit our website to download the app.

Public programs funded in part by the Westport Cultural Council, a local agency supported by the Helen E. Ellis Charitable Trust administered by Bank of America.



WESTPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Friends and strangers gathered to learn more about the life of Herb Hadfield on May 16, 2022

Our two websites offer an ever-growing resource of fascinating local history.

Read more at www.wpthistory.org/blog/

May Baskets: Westport's Forgotten Rite of Spring

Jessie Luther: Artist, Teacher, Pioneer

A Westport Farmer Goes Whaling

Watch public programs and interviews at www.wpthistory.org/video/

Harriet Powers Pictorial Quilt

A History of Lees Market

Mining Climate Clues from our Whaling Past

Lydia Macomber's Letters

An interview with Elsie Buess

Remembering Herb Hadfield

Explore the life of Paul Cuffe at www.PaulCuffe.org