Voices of Connecticut in the French & Indian War

Benjamin West. “The Death of General Wolfe”. The original painting for this print is in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. When it was finished in 1770, it was of major importance due to a number of factors. The event depicted, the death of Wolfe at the capture of Quebec City, was seminal in the shift in the balance of European power in America, with Great Britain overcoming both France and Spain and gaining vast lands in the colonies. The American painter, Benjamin West, broke from the traditional mold of depicting military heroes in classical Roman dress by showing each participant in authentic uniforms of the day as well as adhering to accuracy in landscape and setting. The men surrounding the mortally wounded Wolfe were not present at his death; however, they were at the battle and would share in the notoriety generated by the picture.

JULY 8th [1758] -- Marched up to ye French lines, ye Regulars began battle about one of ye clock in the afternoon. Col. Whiting’s Regiment was ordered up to cover the Regular’s rear. Killed on ye spot of ye Regulars about 400 and some odd men and 1100 wounded. Ye Provincials lost about 100, and wounded about one or two hundred. A Little before sunset we were ordered back to a breast-work about a mile, and in ye night were ordered back to ye Landing. -- Capt. Henry Champion

May 26th, 2010 -- Sarah Melcher, an experienced reenactor of the French and Indian War, will present her findings on the impact the colony of Connecticut had on that war. Her program is based on a study she originally prepared for Noank Historical Society; since then, she has presented her results across the state.

Sarah, a native of Denver, CO, has been reenacting in the northeast for more than a decade. While living in Westchester County, NY, she joined a company of Rogers’ Rangers. After acting as a private soldier of the French and Indian War for that company, she moved on to the Revolutionary War as a member of the King’s Rangers (Loyalists led by the Rogers brothers). In developing her female persona, Sarah dived into the study of period cooking and was soon giving cooking demonstrations at the Van Courtland House Museum in the Bronx; the Thomas Paine Cottage in New Rochelle, NY; the Denison Homestead in Mystic, and elsewhere. She has participated in several hundred reenactment events in 8 states and Canada. She currently serves as the British commander for an exclusive one-week event for elite reenactors called the Lake George Tactical.

In the modern world, Sarah is an independent Knowledge Management consultant, with a web design business on the side. She is an accomplished singer and member of CitySingers of Hartford. She resides in Torrington, CT.
Last month we contemplated genealogical connections to the past and how family forebears related to their own time. For some of us, connections can be made almost as far back as records have been kept. For others (probably the majority of us), after a few generations, the personal family record (oral and written) begins to mist over before it disappears completely. While those mists can frequently be parted to some extent with some diligent research, limitations will typically be encountered which impede further exploration. We’re aware ancestors are out there, but we’ll never actually know them or their stories.

Of course, family ties are only one “method” of connecting to the past. Reading history is another. But neither of those methods necessarily provides a visceral “hands on” connection that makes the past seem less far away, less antiseptically historical. I recently learned of a tradition that seeks to do just that, however.

This past week, an old friend mentioned that he was planning on attending the 2013 graduation ceremonies at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, his alma mater. When I accepted the obvious challenge and asked why his attendance would be significant at that particular graduation, he reminded me that it would be the 50th anniversary of his own graduation (Class of ’63). He went on to explain that the Academy has a long tradition of alumni returning to celebrate their “50th” and to shake the hands of graduating Midshipman (actually, newly commissioned Ensigns and 2nd Lieutenants, depending on destination—Navy or Marines). He distinctly remembered shaking hands with members of the Class of 1913, 50 years before his own.

By itself, that little anecdote wouldn’t be particularly revealing. But, it’s what he said afterwards which I found striking. He said, “you know, when we shook hands with the Class of ’13, men who participated and fought in two world wars, we were all reminded that they had themselves shaken hands with the members of the Class of ’63, that’s 1863!” It was, he noted almost wistfully, as if he had personally shaken the hands of those veterans who graduated in the middle of, and certainly fought in, the Civil War, 100 years before. And, he noted, the graduates in 2013, when shaking his hand, will feel the same odd connection to those who graduated just before World War I and during the Civil War.

Why odd? Well, odd in the sense that for a fleeting moment, 100 years of history (or more) isn’t left in a far gone, hazy past at all—it is entirely in the present through a handshake, not the antiseptic perusal of a dusty page. It just means that 100 or 150 years ago is not really all that long ago. And that’s the point of the story. The next time a history book seems a little dry, whether it’s about events 50 years ago or 250 years ago (or even further back in time), remember that handshake and try to imagine standing next to the people you’re reading about. Perhaps the story won’t seem so dry and remote after all!

A 1902 Annapolis Graduate receives his diploma and shakes hands with President Theodore Roosevelt.

Membership Updates - Cindy Allyn, Membership Chair

At the Individual level, we have had one member who has become active again - Geraldine Phillips and another new member is Melissa Messina. We also have one new member at the Family level - Anita Repp. We are now receiving many renewals and the complete list of members will be listed in the September newsletter.
In 1912 the GSSR operations were leased to the Norwich & Westerly Traction Company and service was extended from the Pawcatuck overpass on to terminate at the Westerly Depot. Eventually some customer dissatisfaction with the fare structure developed and there was even a suit before the Connecticut Public Utilities Commission claiming unfair fares. By the way, the term “Traction” is often seen in the name of companies operating trolley cars. It refers to the act of drawing a vehicle over a surface by means of motor power, not to having a leg in a sling. There is a fine new bike trail along the trolley route from Poquonnock Bridge through Haley Farm. The hope is to extend this trail to include at least a portion of the trolley’s route through Stonington. But you’ll have to use pedal power, not “traction” to experience the ride.

The roadwork on the Stonington side of the bridge has unearthed remnants of Mystic history—trolley tracks. Dave Collins had a nice piece, based on a column by Carol Kimball, in The Day on April 25 telling the basic story of the Groton Stonington Street Railway. Both Bill Haas, the Stonington Town Planner, and an interested gentleman who lives in Noank, contacted the MRHS to inquire if we would like a piece of track from days gone by. All we would need to do is bring down a truck and haul it away. But we already have a piece! We got it a few years back when work was being done on Water Street. As you can well imagine, it doesn’t fit inside the Downes Building so we are keeping it in the side yard of Portersville Academy. Happily it was delivered right to our doorstep, too.

The rolling stock of the GSSR consisted of 4 open cars, 4 closed cars, a work car and a snowplow. This last piece of equipment remained in town long after the trolleys stopped running. It was on a weedy patch of land off of Water Street, about where the Mystic Salon Spa is now. In 1989 the MRHS was instrumental in getting this snowplow car moved to the Trolley Museum in Kennebunkport, Maine.

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The Board of Trustees of the Mystic River Historical Society met on Monday, March 15, 2010. Board Members and Committee Chairmen present were David Evans, Joyce Everett, Bill Everett, Tim Evers, Lois Glazier, Alan Greener, Kay Janney, Jim Kimenker, Betty O'Donnell, John Porter, Jane Preston, Jennifer Pryor, Stephanie Thorp and Kit Werner.

President’s Report (Jim Kimenker): Confirmed that the key to the Congregational Church (used for our monthly general meetings) is stored in the Downes Building. Events around the state are being planned for Connecticut’s 350th Anniversary Celebration and the Board will consider MRHS participation. Information is available on the website, CT375.com. Brochures outlining seminars to be given by the Connecticut League of Historic Organizations and the Connecticut Humanities Council were passed around. The Board voted to contribute $100 to the Mystic Congregational Church, in appreciation for allowing the MRHS to use the Parish Hall for our Appraisal Day on March 20th. The MRHS has applied for a Mystic Woman’s Club grant.

Treasurers Report (Bill Everett): The Balance Sheet for February, 2010 and the Profit and Loss Statement for January and February were presented.

Corresponding Secretary (Kay Janney): Three thank you notes were sent: two for 2009 end-of-year donations and one to Chief Hilbert for his presentation at our February meeting.

STANDING COMMITTEES*

Finance (David Evans): The Finance Committee is planning to meet at some point before the April Board meeting.

Buildings and Grounds (Alan Greener): Painting contractors will begin work on Portersville Academy after June 15th, after the last school group visits. Discussion followed on handicapped access to Portersville Academy. Precedents were cited for many other historic buildings which also have limited access. This fact will be included in messages going out to the schools, so that we can accommodate children with special needs either downstairs in Portersville or in the Downes Building, where a videotaped program could be made available for students to view.

Curatorial (Jane Preston): Briefed the Board on the Curatorial Comm. meeting earlier that day on March 15th. The Committee had discussed deaccessioning procedures as well as new acquisitions from local donors. The MRHS Disaster Plan is in the process of being updated in time for a visit from a state assessment team on June 4th. (The MRHS had earlier applied for and been granted a free assessment of our collections and archives.) The Committee asked that a Board member be present at the assessment; Stephanie Thorp volunteered to represent the Board. The Virtual Exhibit hopefully will be online later this spring and will be presented as part of the program at our May annual meeting. The Board will apply for a grant in order to update the PastPerfect program. Two paintings owned by the MRHS were recently appraised for insurance purposes, and the Committee is investigating several conservators for restoration estimates. Nitrate negative storage and changing preservation needs for the Akeley Collection were also discussed.

Education (No chairman, Tim Evers reporting): 150 first-graders and 500 third-graders from 17 schools are scheduled to participate in MRHS educational programs at Portersville Academy this spring. The last group will visit June 11th.

IT Committee (Stephanie Thorp): The IT Committee performed monthly system updates and file backup tasks on February 27, 2010, has updated the MRHS website to reflect current events planning and schedules, and has included the latest edition of The Portersville Press.

Marketing (Sally Halsey): Worked on PR for the upcoming Appraisal Day March 20th.

Membership (Cynthia Allyn): Since the last Board meeting, we have one new member, Judith E. Sawyer, joining at the Individual level. Annual MRHS membership renewal letters will be mailed soon.

Newsletter (Jennifer Pryor): Discussion followed on a possible reduction of the number of newsletter issues from eight to six annually. Discussion will continue at next meeting.

Nominating (Tim Evers): The Nominating Committee will meet in the coming months to work on finding officers and committee chairs where needed. The committee comprises Tim Evers, Jim Kimenker, and Kit Werner, and is currently seeking a fourth member.

Special Events (Joyce Everett): Appraisal Day is upcoming on Saturday, March 20th at the Mystic Congregational Church Parish Hall, and will run from 10AM to 3PM. Joyce and Co-Chair Laura Kezer will be there at 9AM, with volunteers arriving to help from 9:30 to 3:30. Betty O’Donnell has organized the appraisers’ lunch, with coffee, tea and cookies being provided throughout the day. Joyce expressed concerns about publicity for the event. An Appraisal Day follow-up will be the program for the general meeting Wednesday, March 24th. The MRHS 2010 Spring Trip is now completely filled, with 30-31 travelers; a waitlist is available. Final payments are due and coming in rapidly.

NEW BUSINESS
A brief discussion of Streetscape followed.

The next scheduled Board meeting is April 19th.

Respectfully submitted,
Kit Werner, Recording Secretary pro tem

* Unlisted committees had no reports for this session.
As we start our 20th year we are excited to have almost 600 first and third graders registered to visit PVA this spring.

Due to family commitments Jane Brannegan has had to take a respite from playing the role of Miss Palmer for our first grade visitors. Kay Janney has valiantly agreed to take on this role. Wendy Merckel and Elizabeth Nado will do our Families at Sea program downstairs. Special thanks to Betty Ann Tylaska who has met with Kay to help her plan her schoolroom projects and has loaned her the schoolmistress’ outfit Betty made more than 15 years ago.

Tim Evers will again play the role of our third grade schoolmaster, Mr. Avery, and Pom Robinson will be his understudy. Lou Allyn and Jane Preston will come out of retirement to help train our new volunteers (Tom Santos, Karin Stuart, Susan Keach, Walter Keach, Lois Glazier and Marge Murdock) for one or two of our first sessions. Joyce Everett will also help with training as well as volunteering again this year to share our program, Homelife in the 19th Century, with our third graders. Also, before the young students arrive, we all benefit from Terry Courchaine’s annual donation of cleaning Portersville Academy. Without these intrepid volunteers we could not offer our very popular programs for local school children. Many, many thanks to each of you.

The intrepid MRHS travelers are home safe and sound from Pennsylvania and Virginia! A fine, if exhausting, experience seemed to have been enjoyed by all.

Our final morning, spent at Longwood Gardens, was a spectacular ending to the trip. Participants had the chance to add their ideas for the fall Foliage trip in October. This will be a two or three night trip and possibilities include going to Cooperstown NY, Saratoga and further interesting spots or heading to Strawberry Bank and on up to southern Maine. Which would you prefer? Be certain to let us know immediately along with special places you would like to have included.

Email Joyce Everett at jeverett38@aol.com or call 860-536-6339.

Young visitors ring the bell at Portersville Academy.

Constant Contact Gets Out the Message...

On Friday April 23rd, the Program committee learned that the speaker for the April 28th members meeting had to cancel. Moving very quickly, Aimee Allaire and Bettye Noyes arranged for a new program, and at 1pm on Sunday, a Constant Contact e-mail was sent out to the membership informing them of the program change. If you are not receiving MRHS e-mails with “breaking news” and would like to, please send a note to lallyn@snet.net.
CALENDAR Notables

Membership Meeting
Wed., May 26, 6:00/potluck dinner
7:30/speaker Sarah Melcher

No Membership Meeting in June

This just in!

Membership Meeting
Wed., September 22, 7:30p
Mystic Congregational Parish Hall
Antiques expert Arthur Liverant discusses 250 years of children’s chairs - with many examples to be seen on site!

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- Why, Thanks! -

The Mystic River Historical Society’s Portersville Press would like to thank all of the Patrons and Advertisers for their support. We encourage readers to also offer appreciation and patronage.

MYSTIC RIVER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ANNUAL MEETING & POTLUCK SUPPER

Wednesday, May 26th

6:00 - Supper & Social and 7:30pm - Presentation

featuring Sarah Melcher “Connecticut in the French & Indian War”

Please bring your favorite dish (salad, entree, side or dessert!) to share and BYO plates & flatware. MRHS will provide coffee and cold drinks. This is a fun opportunity for members and guests to socialize - - fun, friendship, tasty treats and a bit of history!

Mystic Congregational Church Hall at Broadway & East Main St., Mystic