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## Bound for Desolation: Sealing & Whaling Out of New London

- Deborah Donovan



Above Left: A drawing of the "Laurens" by Charles H. Kennon from a journal in the New London County Historical Society collection.  
Right: A sketch of elephant seal hunters by W.T. Peters, from the Taylor file, also NLCHS.

In the mid-19th Century, one of the most profitable enterprises in Southeastern Connecticut was sealing and whaling out of New London. The hunting took place on and near Islands in the southern Indian Ocean, not far from the Antarctic Continent. This journey to a lonely land was referred to by the whalers as "the Desolations." At least a quarter of all whaling and sealing voyages leaving from New London in the 1850's, were "Bound for Desolation."

Elephant Seals, named after their prominent proboscis, can weigh up to three tons and grow up to 30 feet long. In the Heard and Desolation Island region of the South Indian Ocean, prime elephant seal hunting season coincided with the Southern Right whales' off-season. This made it possible for crews to stay year-round in the area, hunting and rendering the blubbers into oil. What was a highly profitable endeavor for whalers, had a devastating effect on the Elephant Seal population.



Male Elephant Seal

Speaker Deborah Donovan will give a detailed presentation regarding this adventurous industry at the November 18th MRHS monthly meeting. Ms. Donovan began researching, writing and speaking on significant moments in New

London's history as an American Studies graduate student at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Among these were stories of the city's past as a tourism destination in the Gilded Age; its beginnings as a submarine homeport; its attempts to revive its economy after whaling's demise; and its provocative son, Eugene O'Neill. For her master's thesis she elected to transcribe and annotate a "whaling" journal, which was a recent donation to the New London County Historical Society. This honor's thesis became a three year plus project leading her deep into the history of New London's elephant sealing business, and of the discovery and early exploitation of the sub-Antarctic islands by local whalers/sealers.

In "real life" Ms. Donovan has worked in tourism for over 30 years in development, marketing, & communications. She is currently the Marketing Director for Southeastern Connecticut's economic development agency, SECTer. She holds a BA in English from Newton College of the Sacred Heart (Boston College) in Boston and an MA in American Studies from Trinity College in Hartford. Among other volunteer positions she serves on the Board and as President of the New London County Historical Society, and is Treasurer of the Starr Street Association in New London.



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## from the PRESIDENT'S DESK

Jim Kimenker

Last month I recommended reconsidering the local landscape in thinking about the history around us. I recently took my own advice and used a sunny day as an excuse for one of my favorite things, getting behind the wheel and letting the car go where it might (well, a good map or GPS system is recommended as a companion). This particular day I thought I'd check out ancient cemeteries, which seem to be everywhere. The old stones tell stories, if you're willing to spend time in and around them. My second stop, a little cemetery at the eastern end of Packer Road (near its intersection with the Gold Star Highway), found me riveted in front of a gravestone for John P. Babcock, only 30 years old. Actually, the stone reported he "was slain" on September 6, 1781, killed at the Battle of Groton Heights defending Fort Griswold from British forces under the command of Benedict Arnold (a son of Norwich, for those who may have forgotten). The gravestone continued with the story: "with a small army of Americans, he withstood an assault made by a detachment of British troops of superior numbers". I was riveted, not so much by the story itself, but rather by the "immediateness" of the setting. In other words, here was stark evidence of the horror that was visited on the town. I could only imagine grieving family and friends retrieving his body and transporting it there for burial.

My next stop seemed obvious—ignoring cemeteries, I drove directly to the Fort Griswold monument and proceeded to crawl all over the remains of the fort, reading everything in sight. Sure enough, Babcock was listed among those killed in the battle. The story is rather chilling, as the British slaughtered most of the garrison, even after they'd surrendered, although given the typical "fog" of battle, when and how they surrendered is a matter of

some dispute (a readable history of this obscure battle can be found on the web at [www.battleofgrotonheights.com](http://www.battleofgrotonheights.com)). Since then, I've spent a little time pursuing connections. For instance, I noted the date of the battle, September 6, 1781, seemed awfully close to the Battle of Yorktown, which effectively ended the Revolutionary War. In fact, Cornwallis surrendered on October 19, 1781, barely a month after John Babcock died. My curiosity caused me to meander the internet, which delivered a document I'd never considered before—the Articles of Capitulation signed by Cornwallis—fascinating to see which requests were granted by Washington and which were denied. So, an afternoon ride and hike ended with the reading of a document I'd never thought to read before.

My point, you ask? It's simple, really. History really does live on all around us, whether it's in cemeteries, parks or museums. Allow yourself to be surprised. Look around. It's probably just sitting there staring at you, waiting to be "discovered" again.



## Meeting Minutes Musings

After some deliberation, it was decided to experiment with running an issue of the Portersville Press sans the usual meetings minutiae – or perhaps to determine whether or not they are so considered!

Please feel free to offer your feedback. Comments may be passed along to Jim Kimenker at:

[jhk6@georgetown.edu](mailto:jhk6@georgetown.edu) or home phone: 860-536-1471

*Thank you.*

*The next scheduled MRHS Board meeting is Monday, November 16th. The November membership meeting is Wednesday the 18th.*

### *Mystic River Historical Society Mission Statement*

*The Society exists to collect, arrange, exhibit and preserve records, papers, photographs, artifacts, relics and related archival materials that document the history of the people who lived in the area around the Mystic River from the first settlement in 1654 to the present.*

#### *Officers:*

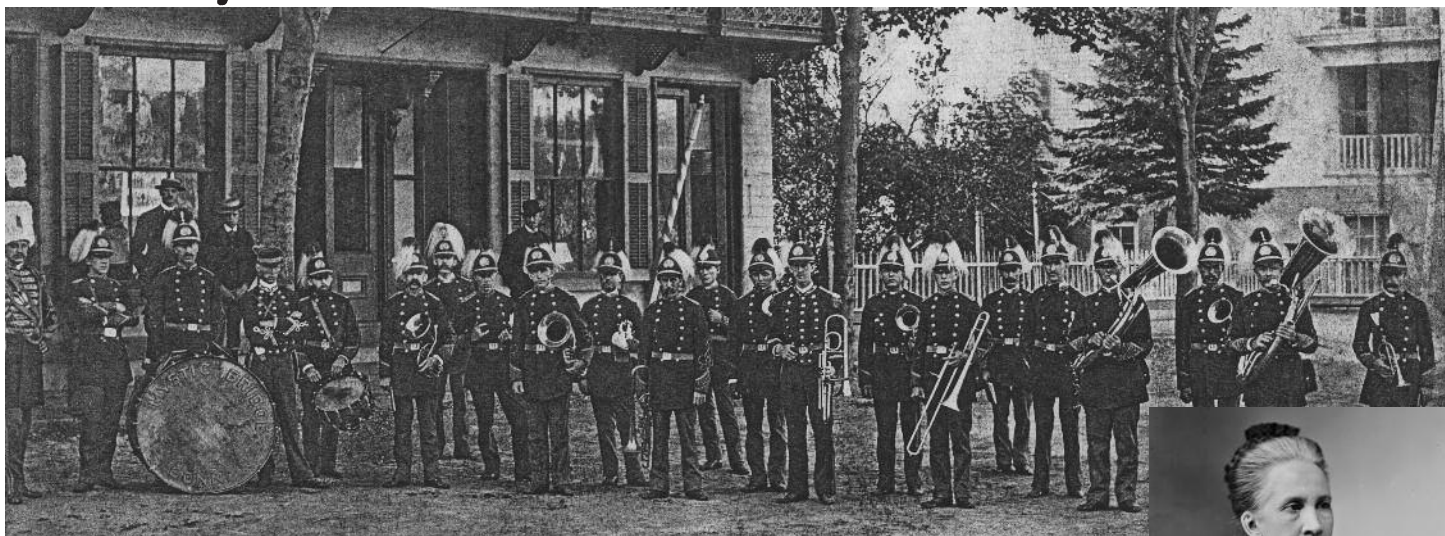
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*The Newsletter of the Mystic River Historical Society is published monthly  
September through May with a combined issue for November and December  
by the Mystic River Historical Society • Box 245 Mystic, CT 06355  
Issues of the newsletter are available for online viewing at [www.mystichistory.org](http://www.mystichistory.org)*



# More on Mystic's Mother Hubbard Parade

- Jane Preston



From the MRHS files: an early iteration of Mystic Cornet Band - mentioned in the historic *Mystic Press* as having participated in the Mother Hubbard Parade. Belva Lockwood, inset, ran for U.S. President in 1884.

Curiosity about Mystic's Mother Hubbard Parade continued to nag at me to such a great extent that I took myself to the Mystic and Noank Library to see what the local papers of the time had to say about it. An article, similar in format to an editorial and entitled Belva Lockwood Parade appeared in the *Mystic Press* of October 28th 1884 and is included following:

*The youth and fun loving elders of the leading political parties got up a burlesque parade at the expense of the Women's Right party or candidate on Monday evening appearing in gorgeous Mother Hubbard costumes, carrying torches, and at the same time treading baby carriages, toting rag babies etc.*

*Hundreds of people, largely ladies, filled the sidewalks and streets to witness the antics of these monstrous representatives of the gentler sex. There were some hundred or more probably 150 in the procession headed by the Mystic Cornet Band. Its drum major most gorgeously dressed in Mother Hubbard with broom for a baton. They marched to the light of colored flares, torches and Roman candles and made quite a comical display while parading the streets an hour or more after which they raised on Williams and Dudley's square a banner made of a piece of menhadensoin bearing a portrait (?) of the candidate elegantly done in black or brown paper by artist Brown, and the words "For President Belva Lockwood". A "poem" was read by the "Sweet Singer of Lyme", which her initials were Jas.T.H.D. and a speech made by "Anna Dickenson" Oscar Hewitt, which was decidedly witty and in parts eloquent.*

*The fun, to use the expression of a noted Centre Grotonian was decidedly "broad gauge" but as a whole was well enjoyed by people. The parade we presume was not designed or calculated to largely increase the votes of the Woman's Rights candidate but it is looked upon as a means of conciliation between parties and the real Lockwoodites will be willing to overlook the informality of the affair for the sake of éclat.*

Although the article provided the basic information about the parade it also helped to create more questions which need to be answered to fill in the blanks for me.



Dorrie Hannah helped me find a photograph in the Society archives of the Mystic Cornet Bank who, according to the article, led the parade with their drum major dressed in a gorgeous Mother Hubbard dress and waving a broom as a baton. You can see by the photo above what an impressive group they were.

But where was Williams and Dudley Square? I have tried in vain to find someone who has any idea of its location. Or is this the name of two squares- Williams Square and Dudley Square- and where were they? And who was the "Sweet Singer of Lyme"? Even though some clue to her identity is given with a partial name and initials we have yet to identify her.

We believe that Oliver Hewitt who appeared as "Anna Dickenson" (Was he dressed in a gorgeous Mother Hubbard gown also?) may have been the editor of a New London newspaper. Is he the same Oliver Hewitt who became a well known editor of a Chicago newspaper in later years?

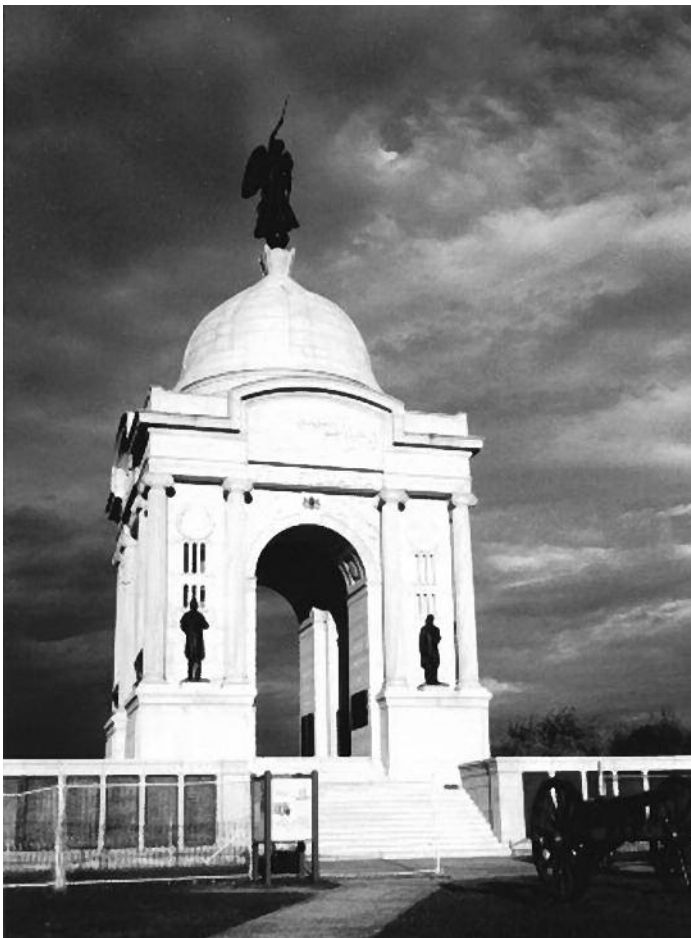
Missing still is the poem that was sent to Sam Haley by Ettie Gates and seems to be what sparked the interest to begin with.

Of course, this was many years ago and I am sure there is no one alive today who was witness to this parade but perhaps there are family stories about it. Please contact MRHS at 536.4779 if you know anything about this interesting event.

# Travellers Enjoyed Long Island, Looking Forward to Gettysburg

- Joyce Everett, Special Activities

The Mystic River Historical Society group trip to Long Island was most successful even though the weather was cold and occasionally wet. We had wonderful visits to grand houses and old houses and small museums and everyone made us welcome. We probably ate too much and a number of us enjoyed the wine tasting on our last day. The MRHS travellers are a great group - cheerful, prompt, and flexible - which makes for a good time for all. We plan to head to Gettysburg and points south for our spring trip, expected to be April 18 through April 22. Do plan to come. More details are expected soon.



*The Gettysburg Battlefield Monument, Gettysburg, PA could be a site candidate for the April 2010 MRHS trip.*

*The Battle of Gettysburg, waged in early July of 1863 is often considered a turning point for the Civil War. The Union's Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade was able to halt the Confederate's Gen. Robert E. Lee's push into the North at the cost of what is estimated to be 46 to 51 thousand total casualties - the highest in the War.*

*In a dedication ceremony for the National Cemetery in November of that year, President Lincoln issued his famous Gettysburg Address.*

# Mapping Main Street Project - Be a Local Participant!



*What would the contemporary interpretation of this E. Main St scene look like...?*

*Are you a 'staycationer' who deeply appreciates our hometown fare? Would you like to be a part of a national project that is making history right now? Sally Halsey thought that MRHS readers might have an interest in this intriguing project that is literally & figuratively mapping our Main Street culture.*

Recently featured on NPR's Weekend Edition, Mapping Main Street is a collaborative documentary project inspired by the observation that "when politicians and the media mention Main Street, they evoke one people and one place. But there are over 10,466 streets named Main in the United States. Once you start looking, you'll notice Main Streets are everywhere and tell all kinds of stories..."

Mapping Main Street is creating a new map of the country through stories, photos and videos recorded on actual Main Streets. They have commissioned bands to write songs for the project and begun a sculpture that will serve as a mobile art installation and recording unit, enabling people to share stories via cell phones. The goal is to document all of the more than 10,000 streets named Main in the United States. *And you are invited to capture the stories and images of the country today.* Go out, look around, talk to people, and contribute to this re-mapping of the United States.

Mapping Main Street is produced through the generous funding of Maker's Quest 2.0, an initiative between the Association of Independents in Radio and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The project is also supported with funds from the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University.

For easy entry details, more information and inspiration, see the website at: [www.mappingmainstreet.org](http://www.mappingmainstreet.org)





We shall resume our usual Appraisal Day & Evening in March. Appraisal Day is scheduled for Saturday, March 20, and the appraisers' presentation of interesting items will be the evening program, March 24.

*Appraisal Day in years past has brought a fabulous assortment of antique & unique items from mantels and attics to the forefront of the show for review, identification and assessment. What's in your cellar?*

Please let us know what appraisal specialties would be useful to you, tell us of any excellent appraisers you know, and volunteer to help!

*- Joyce Everett, Special Activities*

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## Mystic Woman's Club Annual Poinsettia Sale

Mystic Woman's Club is once again sponsoring a Poinsettia Sale during the pre-holiday season, with all proceeds benefitting the Groton & Stonington Human Services Winter Heating Relief Funds.

Beautiful blooms are available in red, pink or ivory in three sizes (S, M, L) at \$9, \$12, and \$20 respectively.

Pequot Plant Farm provides the poinsettias. Deadline for orders is Friday, November 27.

Plants are available for pickup on December 1, at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Mystic. Free delivery is available if requested.

Please call 536-0912 or 536-1633 for ordering, or for further details.

*Thanks for your support!*

# CALENDAR Notables

**Membership Meeting** Wed., November 18, 7:30p  
Fellowship Hall of the Mystic Congregational Church  
Broadway & E. Main, Mystic - Always open to public.  
*Deborah Donovan presents "Bound for Desolation: Sealing  
& Whaling Out of New London"*

**No Membership Meeting in December**

**Membership Meeting** Wed., January 27, 2010 7:30p  
*Cmdr. John McGrath will speak about "The Search for Bon  
Homme Richard"*

**Membership Meeting** Wed., February 24, 7:30p

**Membership Meeting** Wed., March 24, 7:30p

**Membership Meeting** Wed., April 28, 7:30p

**Membership Meeting** Wed., May 26, 7:30p

## Newsletter Patrons

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# Membership Updates - Cindy Allyn, Membership Chair

We have had 8 renewals and 2 new memberships.

The renewals are: **Benefactor** - Mr. & Mrs. Harold Smith Jr. • **Contributing** - Mr. & Mrs. Spencer Leech and Mr. & Mrs. Kevin North • **Family** - Mr. & Mrs. Robert Cushman, Mr. & Mrs. Robert Lord, Mr. & Mrs. Dan Van Winkle, and The Mystic Garden Club • **Individual** - Mrs Charles Baxter

The new memberships are: **Family** -William Haase and Laurie Whiting • **Individual** - David Patience

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