Join us February 26, 7:30 pm at the Mystic River Congregational Church

Mystic has been struck by a number of major fires over the years. When and where did they happen and what was the response of the town after each one?

On February 26, 2020, Louis Allyn will present an overview of Mystic’s fires with a focus on the history of Mystic’s Central Hall Block which was built by the partnership of Mason Packer and Gurdon Allyn on West Main Street in 1863. Since then the building has severely burned multiple times and sometimes totally rebuilt upon its ashes.

Lou Allyn is a native of Mystic and is a direct descendant of Gurdon Spicer Allyn who moved to Mystic around 1840 as a carpenter. Lou retired here from Massachusetts in 1998 and has been a member of the Mystic River Historical Society since 2001, twice as President. He has spoken at Membership meetings on The Great New England Hurricane of 1938 (his lifelong interest) and A Historical Tour of Enders Island. He also created and published A Kayaker’s Guide to the Mystic River and Its History.

The Phoenix of Mystic — The Central Hall Block
Presented by Louis Allyn

Seeking Photos, Memorabilia on the 1960 Mystic Fire
By Marilyn Comrie

The Mystic River Historical Society will present a program in December to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the worst fire in Mystic’s history. The Dec. 12, 1960, fire destroyed two business blocks on both sides of East Main Street from the drawbridge to the flagpole, including nine stores, six businesses and the Strand movie theater, which was built on pilings in the Mystic River.

The fire was discovered just past midnight during a raging snowstorm and was very difficult to battle. The stores were all packed full of merchandise because it was the height of the Christmas shopping season, so the financial loss was significant.

The society is seeking any photos or memorabilia that members or residents may have from the fire and would be willing to share. The society would welcome donations of these items, but for people who don’t want to part with photos, the society can make copies at the archives building and return the originals.

Anyone with photos, film, or memorabilia who is willing to share with the society for this milestone anniversary of an event that changed the landscape of downtown Mystic may contact the society at info@mystichistory.org or call Dorrie Hanna at the archives building at (860) 536-4779.

Deadline for submissions is April 1.
Nothing stays the same forever, and nowhere in Mystic is that more evident than downtown’s Central Hall Block. These images, selected from the MRHS archives show the many forms taken by the block at 8-22 West Main Street, over the last 154 years.
The MRHS archives contain a treasure trove of personal papers, including the scrapbooks, correspondence and diaries of numerous Mystic citizens. The following selections give an intimate glimpse into past Mystic holiday seasons. The first comes from a Civil War soldier writing home to his sister in Mystic from his army camp on New Years Eve. The second comes from a series of diary entries from a young woman describing her experiences in Mystic from Christmas to New Years, 1903.

**Mystic Men Celebrate Christmas in Wartime**

Horatio Nelson Fish, Jr., the son of Lydia and Horatio Fish, Sr. was born August 29, 1843 and raised in Mystic, CT. He grew up in the family home at 148 High St. and was a member of one of Mystic's founding families. He enlisted in the Connecticut Volunteer infantry July 25, 1862 at the age of 18, and served in Company C of the 21st Regiment alongside many Mystic and Noank men. He served two years fighting with the Union Army, before his death at Hampton Hospital in Virginia August 8, 1864 from wounds received in the rifle pits in Petersburg, VA (July 18, 1864). He is buried in the Lower Mystic Cemetery alongside his father.

MRHS has a collection of his letters home, spanning from September 1862 to July 1864. The following letter was written by Horatio to his sister Francis from Newport News, VA on December 31, 1863:

"I enjoyed Christmas very well considering the circumstances. Our tent (that is Wm. C. Beckwith, Samuel Latham, C J Pease and Myself) had an oyster dinner and then we enjoyed ourselves at the usual sports. Playing bass ball. The 23rd Mass. Regiment had a great time. They are camped close by us. They commenced with foot races, bag races which are very laughable, throwing the ax for a prize and to end off with a mock dress parade. The men were dressed in all kinds of ridiculous styles. And officers to match. The whole was a very comical affair. Mr. Tifts folks had a fine Christmas present. I give my respects to Cara and do not forget that picture. I never received that letter you wrote before I went home. Till a day or two since. In it you said, I will send you a picture in my next letter of a young lady who is very anxious that you should ... you will recognize it, and I will send you mine as soon as I can get it taken) know I want you to send that picture along immediately or write me who it is for it puzzles me quite. Explain yourself immediately.

I was very much surprised to hear of Mr. Frederick Clifts death, it must have been very sudden.

Tomorrow is New Years Day but I think it will be a stormy one here. A Happy New Year to you all. I hope e'er another one comes around that this crewel war will be over and then I will make up for this loosen time. But I am getting tired of writing this is only the eighth letter I have written since my return. Send that express box as soon as possible for I am anxious and charge all the expenses to me.

Love to all and tell Julia I would like to hear from Harriett too and do not let Mother work too hard, if the cow is much trouble dispose of it immediately. For you will not make anything by exposing yourself for a little milk.

Vive vale Your Affectionate Brother, Horatio N. Fish"

**The Final Days of 1903, as Recorded by Phebe Burrows**

Phebe E. Burrows (Allen) was born in Mystic February 9, 1884, the daughter of Benjamin and Annie Burrows. At the time of these diary entries, she lived with her father, sister Edna, aunt Elizabeth and grandfather Frances Burrows at the family home on 5 West Mystic Avenue. These diary entries detail her life in Mystic leading up to New Years Day, 1904:

"December 23, 1903
Edna Wilcox telephoned me and wanted to know if I wanted to go to the basketball game and come over and stay all night so I said all right. But when I got down St. I found there was no game. Archie [Gerrish] telephoned to Edna and asked her if he could come over and so he came and staid [sic] quite late and said he was coming up to see Tomorrow night. Edna and I didn’t get to sleep until about three. I was about dead.

December 24
After breakfast Edna and I went down St. and got a few things and then we went home and had a lunch and went down to Ruth’s Christmas tree, not such an awful walk after all. Then we came home and Ruth staid until supper time. While we were eating upper the bell rang and Aunt Lizzie said Archie was upstairs and he gave me the dearest locket. I was never so pleased in my life with anything. It seems as if he must like me. I was so pleased I couldn’t eat my supper. He is going to Westfield.

"Portrait of sisters Phebe and Edna Burrows at ages 6 and 9, c. 1890.

Selections from the Archives: Mystic Christmases Past
By Elizabeth Boucher

Sketch of Horatio Nelson Fish, Jr.
December 25

Didn’t do much in the morning, but after dinner went up to Ruth’s and it was awfully funny she had two of everything and then we went on to Edna Wilcox. Libbie Lat- ham was there. Then we came home and got ready for the Church tree. Charlie Mallory came home with me and we stopped in Edna’s and Edna kept saying about my lockets and he got crazy so he didn’t stay long.

December 26

Ruth came up in the afternoon and she wanted me to go down and call on Miss Dunlop who was staying at Mrs. Chapmans. Well if it wasn’t cold “I never want to see it when it is.” The trees would snap and crack and I thought we would freeze to the doorstep before she let us in. Well she was an awful talker and she wanted to a recital somewhere so Ruth thought her Aunt might like to have her give one at her house. It was so cold we didn’t go down St. but Frank Baton came just the same.

December 27

Went to Church in the morning, it wasn’t quite cold, but cold enough. Ruth came up about 6:30 and we went to Church. Louise Haley came and called about four and then we went over to Edna’s. Well Ruth and I went to the Baptist Church and there was nothing doing so we got out and go over to the Methodist Church and they are having a concert over there so we stay until it is over.

December 28

Edna Wilcox came up and we decided to have the recital up here on Wednesday and we directed the invitations and then she wanted me to go over there to supper so I went over to supper and she came home with me and staid all night and we went and got Miss Dunlop up to practice. I can’t understand Archie he hasn’t written to me or anything. He is a funny cuss.

December 29

Edna and I got up bright and early and went to invite people. We were about frozen. Saw Archie on the barn (so he has got home). Got home in time for dinner. It snowed awfully hard but Edna wanted me to go to Stonington to see if we could get Lillie Braton to sing and so we went over. The snow had turned to rain and it was awful. Lillie Braton wasn’t home so we went for nothing. I staid over to Edna’s to supper and when I got home my clothes were frozen. I though Archie would come up, but he didn’t.

December 30

I telephoned Edna and told her when she saw Ruth going by not to go to school so she did and Ruth came up and helped us get ready for the recital. Edna made some of the finest fudge and penuchie [penuche] and the people came about three and Miss Dunlop was rather slow about coming and she didn’t speak as good as she had the other night and there wasn’t quite as many there as I had hoped. Edna and Ruth staid until 7:30 and I walked over to Edna’s and she dressed all up for Archive and when I got up to Meeting House Hill he was sliding with Louise Haley.

December 31

Didn’t go out but pressed the box pleats in my blue dress to see if I couldn’t make it look a little better. Frank Baton asked if I would go with him so I called Edna and asked her what she thought about it and she said she would go with him she was because then Archie would go with her) but I didn’t care so I told him I would go. We went over for Edna and there was a stupid concert at first but afterwards dancing. Had a fine time. Danced every dance and we walked back to Edna’s.”

Photograph of sledders at Baptist Hill in front of the Union Baptist Church, taken by Jesse Stinson, ca.1868. This view shows the hill before Wheeler’s Store built in 1884 and after the construction of the Mystic River Bank, 1851.

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 1634 to the present.

Officers: President - Stephen Menno • Vice President - Margaret Austin • Treasurer - Lou Allyn • Corresponding Secretary - Elizabeth Holland

The Newsletter of the Mystic River Historical Society is published five times annually: September-October, November-December, January-February, March-April and May-June

Past issues of the newsletter are available for viewing at www.mystichistory.org

P.O. Box 245 Mystic, CT 06355
October 2019 Meeting Minutes - - -

The Board of Trustees of the Mystic River Historical Society met on Monday, October 21, 2019. Attendees were: Cindy Allyn, Lou Allyn, Margaret Austin, Marilyn Comrie, Lois Glazier, Stephen Menno, John Parry, and Richard Semeraro.

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 pm by President Menno.

A motion was made, seconded and passed to accept the minutes of the September 16, 2019 meeting.

President (S. Menno): Two people have expressed interest in joining the Board of Directors.

Treasurer (L. Allyn): As of September 30 cash in the bank was $2,429.26 • Membership Dues of $10,115 are running behind last year’s $11,355 through September. 37 printed reminders were mailed in September. • A motion was made, seconded and passed to accept the Treasurer’s Report.

Corresponding Secretary (L. Holland): No letters were written.

Curatorial (L. Allyn): From Dorrie Hanna – The Downes Building will be closed Thanksgiving week, November 25 ~ 29; Christmas week, December 23 ~ 27; and New Year’s week, December 30 ~ January 3. We will re-open on Tuesday, January 7, 2020 at 9 a.m. We will be monitoring our email and our Facebook page.

Finance (L. Allyn): The Finance Committee met Thursday October 17th to prepare the 2020 budget. A motion was made, seconded and passed to transfer $5,000 from Vanguard Money Market Fund to Chelsea Groton checking to cover expenses until dues start coming in in January.

Information Technology (S. Thorp): No report.

Membership (C. Allyn): Jim and Betty Collins are new members; Mrs. Robert Irons died.

Mystic Noank Library (R. Semeraro): The current reading “Ledyard, In Search of the First American Explorer” by Bill Gifford is about John Ledyard.

Newsletter (S. Menno): The first Portersville Press edited and published by Elizabeth Boucher was mailed. Copy for the next edition is due this Thursday.

Programs (M. Austen):
Our upcoming meetings and the associated speakers are as follows:
October 23, 2019: Roy Manstan, "TURTLE: David Bushnell's Revolutionary Vessel" and Connecticut’s Role in Submarine History
December 4, 2019: Damien Cregeau, "Great 18th Century Houses and Towns of Connecticut"
February 26, 2020: Lou Allyn, "The Phoenix of Mystic - The Central Hall Block"
March 25, 2020: Leslie Evans, "Votes for Women - Celebrating 100 Years of Women's Suffrage"
April 29, 2020: Gail MacDonald, "Hidden History of Mystic and Stonington"
May 27, 2020: Steve Slosberg, "Stonington Cemetery's Poet's Corner: A Stroll Along This Storied Lane"

Social Media (L. Pyrke-Fairchild): No report.

Lower Mystic Cemetery (L. Allyn): Rufus Allyn and Roy Bohlander helped move the east gate to Jack Garbarino’s house for him to weld the broken lower bar. Flags will be put on veteran’s graves for Veteran’s Day.

Helen Clarke Walking Tour (M. Comrie): The October 5th tour was well received by 50 people in three groups led by Marilyn, Margaret Austen and John Parry. 9 of Helen’s diaries were sold. A suggestion was made to investigate using an online applicant, such as Eventbrite or Ticket Tailor, to register and pay for future walks. A thank you letter for use of their parking lot will be set to the

Mystic River Park (M. Comrie): Marilyn will follow up on her meeting with the Park Commission regarding a celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Park in 2020. She will get a quotation on installing small wooden plaques on the five remaining historic Cottrand Lumber Company buildings.

Virgil Huntley Lecture Series (J. Parry): John summarized discussions held by the Program Committee on a project to encourage research, articles and lectures about Mystic history with emphasis on local families and their connections to the village. Work will continue with a goal of receiving proposals by next June.

New Business: 50th Anniversary of MRHS in 2023 (M. Comrie): Marilyn proposed that a historical booklet similar to one on the Cedar Grove Cemetery in New London be created and published – perhaps as an Arcadia Press America Through Time issue. See http://elmgrovecemetery.org/history.html

Next Meeting – November 18, 2019 7:00 pm Mystic Noank Library

The Meeting was adjourned at 8:15 pm

Respectfully submitted, Lou Allyn

December 2019 Lecture - - -

On December 4, Mr. Damien Cregeau presented a talk on "Great 18th Century Houses and Towns of Connecticut." This lively and extremely thorough presentation touched on houses throughout Connecticut. Most still exist, but a few no longer do. Of special interest to those of us in the Mystic area, Mr. Cregeau's talk included the Denison Homestead here in Stonington and the Shaw Mansion in New London. Pictured from left to right: John Parry, Steve Menno, Damien Cregeau and Margaret Austen.

Editors Note:

The editor apologizes for some inaccuracies in the membership list printed in the Nov/Dec. issue, and offers the following corrections:

Mrs. Charles Alfano is a Family Member.

Melissa Messina (printed as Mrs. Melissa) is an Individual Member.
Events Calendar

7pm Tuesday, January 14 AND February 11, 2020
History Book Club—MRHS & MNL Partnership
Activities Room, Mystic Noank Library
The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism
by Edward E. Baptist
Always Open to New Readers!

7pm Wednesday, February 26th, 2020
“The Phoenix of Mystic—Central Hall Block”
Presented by Lou Allyn
7:00 refreshments & socializing, 7:30 program
Mystic Congregational Church Hall,
Broadway & E. Main, Mystic

Bring a friend! All meetings are free and open to the public!
Donations are always welcome. Renew or become a Member of MRHS for updates about our events.
Contact us at info@mystichistory.org

Membership Updates

We have one new member, Cara Lopilato, who is also a new member of the MRHS Board.

-Cindy Allyn, Membership

Newsletter/Print Patrons

CYNTHIA AND LOUIS ALLYN
LAURA BEACH AND JOSHUA KALKSTEIN
DANIEL & JANE BRANNEGAN
MR. & MRS. FRANKLIN DAVIS
MR & MRS. FRED DEICHMANN
DENSMORE OIL
KATE DIMANCESCU
HERMINE DUDDA
DAVID EVANS
ALICE FOLEY
MR. CRAIG HAINES
MR. & MRS. DOUG HANNA
JUDY HICKS
MURIEL HINKLE
LYNN AND LIZ HOLLAND
NANCY & TOM MCLOUGHLIN
MRS. ROGER PANCIERA
MR. & MRS. JOHN PARRY
JACK & PEGGY SINKS
THE REAL McCOY® RUM

Non-Profit Organization

Published Five Times Annually—Free