In 1757, a sailing ship owned by an affluent Connecticut merchant sailed from New London to the tiny island of Bence, in Sierra Leone, West Africa, to take on fresh water and slaves. On board was the owner’s son, on a training voyage to learn the trade.

With our March presentation, writer Anne Farrow explores the significance of the voyage of The Africa and two other ships, via the logbooks as documented by that young man – unearthing new realities of Connecticut’s slave trade and questions how we could have forgotten this part of our past so completely.

A journalist and independent historian, Anne Farrow has spent the last decade exploring the content and the meaning of a set of 18th-century New London slaveships’ logbooks. She will discuss her work and her book “The Logbooks: Connecticut’s Slave Ships and Human Memory”, published several months ago by Wesleyan University Press. Her work has been described by The Boston Globe as “History at its best,” and by modern scholars as “heart-breaking, revealing, and redemptive.” Anne co-authored “Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged and Profited from Slavery” (Ballantine/Random House, 2005). She was a writer and editor for The Hartford Courant for nearly 20 years, and currently is a writer and researcher for museums in Connecticut. Anne will be available for book signing, as well, at her presentation on Wednesday, March 25th at 7pm - please join us!

For April: New England Heritage Gardens and Heirloom Seed History

In a nod to Earth Day, our Wednesday, April 22nd Members Meeting will feature Irina Stoinescu of Comstock, Ferre & Co. with a discussion on New England Heritage Gardens and the history of heirloom seeds in America.

Stoinescu manages Comstock Ferre & Co. of Wethersfield, CT, the oldest continuously operating seed houses in the United States. While their first catalog dates back to 1811, the Comstock Ferre & Co. of today works to promote and preserve our agricultural and culinary heritage via their parent group, Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds. The company continues to offer a wide variety of heirloom seeds and is a venue for many educational events, as well as a spring heirloom plant & agricultural history festival.
We’ve spent time in this column discussing how to read history, how to think about reading history (well, there’s a difference to me, anyway), and how to avoid allowing personal prejudice to distort reading history. The “lessons” have been ongoing (I think I can hear some of you mumbling, “and never ending”). One thing we have not discussed is our predilection for always being on the right side of history.

What do I mean by that? Well, it’s reasonably simple—as we’ve noted before, when we read history, we have the ultimate advantage in the story telling—we know how it ends. More importantly and for purposes of this particular column, when we read history of which we are direct descendants in one way or another, we know who was in the “right”, or at least how the “right” is interpreted and accepted today in the present. And, let there be no doubt, we are at least subconsciously certain of our own choices had we “been there”. If we were raised in the North, I’d wager a fair amount that consciously certain of our own choices had we “been there”. If we were raised in the North, I’d wager a fair amount that there is little doubt in our minds that we’d have voted for Lincoln in both 1860 and 1864.

However, without a cautious and objective reading of history, how certain can we be that we would have acted on the “right” side of history? For our purposes here, the challenge is stark—can we be certain of how we ourselves might have acted, based on our own education and experiences today?

Consider the following circumstances. You’re asked to pick sides and you are aware of the following:

– you are living in, arguably, the most affluent and free place on earth.
– yet one faction is religiously and politically intolerant—for them it is quite literally, “our way or the highway (let’s refer to them as the “Highway Men”).
– leaders of the Highway Men are involved in the illegal sale of certain products which they are not licensed to sell. Businesses which are licensed to sell those products are prepared to sell them below the Highway Men’s cost, potentially bankrupting them; those same leaders now insist that you should boycott the legally sold goods, which would bankrupt the properly licensed business. Their insistence is backed up by threats of violence if you refuse.
– and the threats are real; the Highway Men practice what we would today view as terrorism—burning down the houses of people with whom they disagree and abducting and physically torturing them.
– the Highway Men indignantly refuse any & all compromise, being not at all interested in the democratic or popular will.
– the civil liberties of the Highway Men are, for the most part, respected by the government, even while they disregard the rights of those who oppose them. Based on the foregoing, would you cast your lot with the Highway Men when they violently oppose the government?

What is the point of all this? Those of you who have read Nathaniel Philbrick’s, “Bunker Hill”, will recognize the game I’m playing here. As he deftly and objectively describes the environment in Boston and New England before the start of the Revolution, it becomes painfully obvious that many of us might find the actions of the Patriots and their leaders (our Highway Men in the above litany) exceedingly distasteful and the situation of the Loyalists difficult, to the point of being nearly heartbreaking. Is it possible we might have cast our lot with the Loyalists and not the Patriots? Thousands at the time did. Ultimately it cost them their homes and their homeland.

So, there are actually two points to be made here. The first is to reconsider how we view history in which we have a personal stake — think critically, as Philbrick does, and be prepared to reject the simple thought that the winners were right. And don’t stop there. Any reconsideration of the past naturally has a use in the present. Perhaps things are not as they (obviously) seem. In other words, use your skill and interest in history to think about what is happening around us in current events.

Second, put all of Nathaniel Philbrick’s books on your “Must Read” list. All of them!

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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 - Lou Allyn • Vice President - Bill Everett
Treasurer - Barry Thorp • Corresponding Secretary - Lois Glazer • Recording Secretary - Cindy Allyn

The Newsletter of the Mystic River Historical Society is published six times annually: September, October, November-December, January-February, March-April and May • Box 245 Mystic, CT 06355
Issues of the newsletter are available for online viewing at www.mystichistory.org
Q: “Where...?” A: Here....

In the last issue of the Portersville Press, Lou Allyn asked readers if they could identify two mystery photos of buildings at some kind of summer camp. It turns out that two people recognized the images: Jim Roy and Bill Lewis.

The buildings are for a Boatel on Ram Island which was built by Arthur Van Winkle in the 1960’s, Allyn believes. His son, Dan, has memories of working out on the island constructing the buildings. It would be interesting to get the stories down on paper before more time goes by.

Jim Roy sent the following:

Thanks for sharing! That was "home" for many summers! My brother (John) and I stayed there from about 1970-1977. We lived with the Craig Family (caretakers for the Van Winkle's). The Ragsdale's purchased the Island around 1977. Since then it has been their private haven.

The "cottage", I recall, was built out of cinder blocks and was very basic (two tiny bedrooms and a small main area); although there was a generator I don't recall there was power to the cottage.

Certainly "five star" deluxe accommodations by Ram Island standards! During the prime season the cottage was always reserved for several different families. Early and late season I was lucky enough to sleep there. We would go out to the Island only on the weekends (while school was in session).

The image (of the main building) was taken facing SW. The bump-out to the right on the building was a couple of shower stalls. Hot water was available if the generator had been running for several minutes. (I never took a shower there! We spent most days in the salt water!) The rusty old Jeep was always parked up front.

It was used for many purposes over many, many years. I recall the Jeep transported everything from fuel (for the generator) to provisions, to garbage, which we brought back to the mainland and then to the Groton Dump. The Town Dock in Noank was the main access point to a vehicle (Mr. Craig’s truck).

Along the back porch of the main building there were two rooms which were typically used by adults or the Craig girls. Occasionally, if lucky (during stormy weather), the Craig and Roy boys would share a room. Most of the time all of the boys slept on the open air porch -- I never recall sleeping past 6 AM!

The OLD generator was housed behind the garage door on the right. It supplied water pressure, hot water and electricity for lights and the ever so important juke box! To start the generator we had to hand crank it! (Similar to starting a model T, I was told...) All of the boys were experts at starting the generator! Mr. Craig would run it for a little bit each morning and maybe for an hour every night.

Thanks again for the trip down "memory lane"!

~ Jim Roy

Bill Lewis sent the image below, and wrote:

(The buildings) look like the mini-motel that was cared for by Gus Craig on Mystic (Ram) Island. I used to land there in the 1960’s with an Army OH-23B Helicopter, to the joys of the adults and children. They were some fun times that you can no longer can do!

~ Bill Lewis

Exploring Exhibits Virtually

Have you explored the “Virtual Exhibits” on our MRHS website? Old images of Mystic are always of interest and you can click through several groups of them with the Virtual Exhibit feature. Recently Louisa Watrous uploaded a number of holiday related images and we have had some good feedback. For example, MRHS member Laurie Capener emailed from Utah to offer corrections and amplification to some captions for the “Mystic Families” group. Member Jane Preston was in touch from Massachusetts with a question about the image captioned “Grandmother Gallup and her dog.” We’re always hopeful that sharing these pictures on-line will prompt someone to contact us with information about the people or places depicted.

This leads me to my favorite “rant” – Identify your pictures! Get out all those shoeboxes and albums and purge and organize. For pictures that are extra special consider having them scanned to digital and saved to a DVD. Not to mention reviewing the image files you downloaded from your camera and never looked at again. If you’re like me, you have literally hundreds of those on your hard drive and many don’t even have a helpful file name. I’ll admit that this can be a huge project, but hey! It’s a good one for the gloomy months of winter and it’s more fun than working on your taxes!
In the January-February 2015 issue of the Portersville Press I promised you a series of seven articles about the historic Lower Mystic Cemetery; this is the first.

When you leave Mystic on Route 1 (New London Road) and go past the Fire House, at the bottom of the hill on the right is the Lower Mystic Cemetery. A handsome granite wall runs along the south side. If you wish to visit the cemetery limited parking is in the small area between the angle of the wall at its east end and the road. There is a chain on the gate but no lock; please close securely when you leave.

Town of Groton GIS Tax Map – note that the name shown here is Fishtown Cemetery

The Lower Mystic Cemetery located at 183 New London Road, is 1.879 acres in size and is assessed at $28,200. Its design is a formal street and avenue grid with a circle in the center containing a well. The original layout was with six numbered avenues running East/West and eight unnumbered avenues running North/South. There were numbered 140 full plots plus 14 half plots. The Explanatory Remarks that are at the bottom of the diagram below are: “The regular lots in the Cemetery are 18 feet North and South, 16 feet East and West. If 4 lots are taken together, each lot will be 18 feet square, the 4 making a square of 36 feet as seen in the diagram, but if enclosed separate a space of 4 feet will be left, running North and South.

Parts of lots that are not numbered in the diagram, if taken with the lot that joins it will be the same number, but if disposed separately will be designated by adding half. The space or road through the centre is 24 ft. wide, passes round a circle 40 ft. across the centre, and a well in the centre of said circle; the road around it is 12 ft. wide. The South Avenue joining the Highway [I suspect that the granite wall was added later.] is 9 feet wide; the North 8 feet; East and West 7 feet; 4 running East and West 6 feet each; the Avenues running North and South, the 4th from the road through the middle, both East and West is 7 feet each; the rest is 4 feet.” I’d say a lot of thought went into this design.

The satellite image from Google Earth shows the parking area to the right, the main gate in the middle of the south wall, and the well in the circle in the center of the cemetery (B). The Buckland crypt (A) is to the upper right hand. The dark square to the right just inside the gate is the fenced plot of the Delano family (C). Notice that the avenues run from left to right and the streets north to south. The streets are barely visible in the grass at ground level but are plain to see from above.

The next issue will discuss the early history of the cemetery, the founding families and the By-Laws.
The last strongholds of the Confederacy are falling, and many Mystic soldiers are in the thick of the action. The 8th, 10th, and 21st regiments are in the trenches around Richmond. The 14th and the 1st Heavy Artillery are at Petersburg. The 1st Cavalry and the 12th regiment of infantry are in the Shenandoah Valley. With military victory in sight, the problems of desertions from both sides, smuggling, low morale and shortages in the south, and thousands of refugee slaves, who clog the roads and impede the movement of the troops, dominate the war news.

The renewal of prisoner exchanges brings hope to families who have not heard from their loved ones in many months. Alexander McDonald, who had been a ship’s carpenter before enlisting in the 1st Cavalry, was captured near Ashland, Virginia in June 1864. Sergeant McDonald survived nine months in the Confederate prison at Salisbury, North Carolina, before his release. However, some returnees bring devastating news of their comrades. After long months of hoping, the families of Orrin D. Barker of the 21st, and Elias W. Watrous of the 8th regiment, both wounded and taken prisoner at Drury’s Bluff in May, 1864, learn their boys died in captivity. The remains of Henry Bennett of the 1st Cavalry, who died of exposure in the Federal Hospital in Frederick, Maryland, are sent home for burial in Elm Grove.

The local newspaper carries word of the progress of the 13th Amendment, abolishing slavery in the United States, through the various state legislatures. As of March, 18 states have ratified it, and three – Delaware, New Jersey, and Kentucky – have voted to reject. The Connecticut legislature has announced it will schedule a vote when its session begins in May. There seems to be no doubt that Connecticut will vote in support.

Local businessmen are starting to look past the war. Anticipating a renewal of trade with the South, Joseph and Levi Watrous have formed a partnership to manufacture cotton gins, gin saws, and related materials in Cotrell’s old machine shop. Hill and Grinnell have contracted to build a steamer for parties in Baltimore. All the local shipyards have at least one vessel on the stocks. Hoping that peace will bring more trade, Charles Mallory purchases the Randall wharf, store, cooperage and store house at auction.

In spite of the length of the war, Mystic has maintained its belief in the union cause. On March 11, the Mystic Pioneer prints President Lincoln’s Second Inaugural address in its entirety, without comment. But “malice toward none” and “charity to all” does not extend to “one of the most reckless kind of bounty jumper,” who eluded his guard and jumped off the train from Providence as it was nearing the Mystic Depot. His capture on the Stonington Road is widely celebrated.

Finally, the end is in sight. After five years of war, many Mystic men find themselves as witnesses to history in the conflict’s final days. The big guns of the 1st Heavy Artillery go silent as Petersburg falls. The 1st Cavalry, and 10th and 14th regiments of infantry are at Appomattox Courthouse to witness Lee’s surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia on April 9. The 8th and 21st regiments march into Richmond as part of the Federal occupying forces. Yet even as the war appears to be winding down, the Mystic Manufacturing Company receives a contract from the government for 150,000 yards of Army cloth!

News of Lee’s surrender “caused the wildest enthusiasm” on the rainy morning of Monday, April 10th. As the Mystic Pioneer reported, “Flags were displayed, the bells rung, and in the evening many dwellings and stores were brilliantly illuminated, but on account of the rain, it was, by common consent, agreed to celebrate in a more general manner on the next evening. Tuesday flags were seen flying from nearly every house-top in Mystic, cannons were fired, bells rung, and in the evening nearly all the dwelling houses, stores, and factories were illuminated, while the Mystic Cornet Band added much to the enthusiasm by discouraging most excellent music. A bevy of girls sang patriotic airs under the liberty pole.”

The euphoria does not last long. The following Friday, in a tragic twist of fate, President Lincoln is assassinated at Ford’s Theater in Washington D.C. Black borders between the Pioneer’s columns outline the sorrow of the community. “On receipt of the sad intelligence in this village, the flags were displayed at half mast, and every one gave expression to their sorrow, and not a few to their indignation.” On Wednesday, more than a thousand citizens assemble at the Liberty Pole and in front of Merchants Row. Led by the Cornet Band, now playing funeral dirges rather than patriotic airs, they process through the major streets to the Union Baptist Church, the town’s largest venue, where the clergy from many denominations lead a solemn memorial service.

As the inhabitants of Mystic mourn, the Connecticut 5th is in North Carolina with Sherman’s army, in pursuit of General Joseph E. Johnston. The agreement Sherman reaches with Johnston goes far beyond Grant’s agreement with Lee, and effectively ends all hostilities. Yet unlike Lee’s surrender the preceding week, Johnston’s passes almost unnoticed.

As April ends, the mood is Mystic remains subdued. The Pioneer publishes a biography of the new President, Andrew Johnson, a Tennessean still largely unknown to New Englanders. Ori E. Chapman Jr. of the 12th Connecticut Volunteers, who had been captured at Cedar Creek in Virginia, held in Confederate prisons, and paroled, dies of fever at home. The long-awaited Union victory proves bittersweet.
**November 2014 Meeting Minutes**


**President (L. Allyn):** Motion made, seconded & approved to accept October meeting minutes. • Sally Halsey appointed to fill a third year vacancy for an elected board member.

**Corresponding Secretary (L. Glazier):** Seven thank-you letters were sent since the last meeting.

**Treasurer (B. Thorp):** November 2014 activity: All deposits made and all bills paid current. Account books are reconciled with bank statements. Deposits were made to the Chelsea Groton checking and funds were transferred from the Vanguard Money Market account into checking to cover operating expenses for remainder of the year, as planned in 2014 budget. Checking account balance is positive.

**Finance (D. Evans):** The proposed 2015 Operating Budget was presented, discussed, voted upon and accepted. Revenue is down from the 2014 budget due to lower donations and no grants, and expenses are up.

**Building & Grounds (L. Allyn, acting):** Jeremy Shiman will provide an estimate to repaint Portersville Academy; the cupola is peeling in many places. A grant application will be made from the 1772 Foundation. There is a rotting window sill on the first floor west side that needs to be repaired.

**Curatorial (L. Allyn, acting):** From D. Hanna - Committee met on January 12th, (not in November or December.) Scheduled holiday closings of the Downes Building did not appear to have impact on dealing with queries. We are preparing the final paperwork to officially & permanently transfer the MRHS books housed at the Mystic & Noank Library to the Library. We will also be working with Union Baptist Church to provide images for updated version of their history.

**Information Technology (S. Thorp):** System Administrator performed updates & backups to the computer system on 5 and December 2014. All equipment appears to be in good condition, functioning as designed. He installed a current copy of the MRHS membership database on Computer 2.

**Marketing & Special Events (S. Halsey):** Notices of upcoming membership meetings have been sent to the media.

**Program & Membership (A. Allaire):** Speakers for Membership Meetings are scheduled through March. Four new members have joined since the previous meeting.

**New Business** We held a brainstorming session to develop a list of potential fund raising events. Stephanie offered to look into holding a postcard fair in 2015.

Next meeting is January 12, 2015, 7pm Mystic Noank Library Respectfully submitted, Cindy Allyn

**Ed. Note:** There is no December board meeting. Minutes are printed in the issue following the meeting in which they are approved. • Committees with no reports not listed.

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**January 2015 Meeting Minutes**


**President (L. Allyn):** A motion was made, seconded and approved to accept the minutes of the November meeting as published. • Dues increase • Painting Portersville Academy

**Corresponding Secretary (L. Glazier):** A thank-you letter was sent to the Mystic Garden Club for their Christmas wreath along with two others sent since the last meeting.

**Treasurer (B. Thorp):** Expenses for the months of November & December were essentially non-discretionary payments for services and operations. The Chelsea Groton checking account balance is positive, and a request for funds from the Vanguard Money Market account will be made shortly.

**Building & Grounds (L. Allyn, acting):** Jeremy Shiman has provided an estimate to repaint Portersville Academy. Requests for proposals have been sent to 4 other painters. Because of the age of the roof shingles it is necessary to paint the cupola without going onto the roof. A request to apply for a grant from the 1772 Foundation has been accepted. • David Tetlow will be doing the snow plowing.

**Curatorial (L. Allyn, acting):** From D. Hanna - Committee met on January 12th, (not in November or December.) Scheduled holiday closings of the Downes Building did not appear to have impact on dealing with queries. We are preparing the final paperwork to officially & permanently transfer the MRHS books housed at the Mystic & Noank Library to the Library. We will also be working with Union Baptist Church to provide images for updated version of their history.

**Information Technology (S. Thorp):** System Administrator performed updates & backups to the computer system on 5 and December 2014. All equipment appears to be in good condition, functioning as designed. He installed a current copy of the MRHS membership database on Computer 2.

**Marketing & Special Events (S. Halsey):** See article in Jan-Feb Portersville Press, Friends of MRHS, about our Facebook page which is at www.facebook/mystichistory.

**Program & Membership (A. Allaire):** The Committee met on January 8th, 2015 and approved the new membership fee schedule to help close the gap in MRHS’ yearly operating costs. Programs are scheduled through October. • December’s program given by Laura Crow was fun & fascinating. 60 people attended and $77 in donations was received. January 28th will be Capt. Carl Lahti speaking on The History of the Naval Submarine Base. April’s program will feature Irina Stoenescu, Manager of Comstock, Ferre and Co. in Wethersfield. This oldest seed company in America is willing to let us do a seed-selling fundraiser in conjunction with the talk on heirloom seeds, native seed varieties and CT’s important role in selling seeds in the United States. The talk will be, appropriately enough, on Earth Day. • The Committee has decided to start each Members meeting at 7:00 for a half hour of refreshments with the program beginning as usual at 7:30.

**No New Business, no reports for Finance, Marketing & Special Events, or Education/Outreach.**

Next meeting February 23, 2015, 7:00 pm Mystic Noank Library Respectfully submitted, Cindy Allyn
Thank you, Jeremy Shiman!

We would like to thank Jeremy Shiman of J.F. Shiman Painting Co. LLC for his donation of work done to remove a section of rotten molding from the base of the pediment on Portersville Academy and paint the exposed wood behind it. Great community support comes in all manner of talent, and helps to keep our history alive for the next generation - thanks, Jeremy!

Collection Manager’s 2014 Annual Report - D. Hanna

During 2014 the Downes Archives Building was open the customary 9 hours per week with the following exceptions: Closed January 1 & 2; Closed February 2 due to icy conditions; Closed July 4; closed the week of Thanksgiving; closed the week of Christmas and December 30 & 31.

The Curatorial Committee met 8 times during 2014. The Committee consisted of Judy Hicks, Dorrie Hanna, Louisa Watrous, Dave Scott, Richard Semerraro and Kit Werner. MRHS President Lou Allyn serves as acting chairman.

Paid staff at the Downes Building are Dorrie Hanna (9 hours/week), Betsy Boucher (6 hours/week beginning in the 4th Quarter of FY 2014) and Louisa Watrous (3 hours/week). In 2014 we added 18 new collections. Betsy reported 2,407 records added or updated. Further progress was made on processing the material from the Coogan and Marshall families. 283 new records were added and 704 updated for this group.

Louisa added images and information to our Virtual Exhibit page, which had an increased number of viewers compared to last year.

We responded to more than 125 queries. The majority of these came via e-mail or phone, but we did have more than 65 in person visitors and many of them were seeking information. This visitor count does not include MRHS members. Requests included academic research, genealogy, house history, general local history, and requests for images. We successfully concluded the majority of these requests. Some remain open in the hope that more information will be located. Usually if we were unable to help it was because the query was too vague/broad or it required resources that we don’t have.

A new source of inquiries this year has been Facebook. This was not so much the result of folks directly accessing the MRHS Face Book page, although we did see more traffic there than last year. Rather, I was able to offer information about questions posted on other groups’ pages.

Local organizations consulting the MRHS included the Coogan Farm people & Maggie Jones from the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center, the Stonington Historical Society, Union Baptist Church and the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation.

We had 14 requests for images. Eight were for single images or small numbers. Requests for larger numbers of images were filled for The Coogan Farm (display), the CT Trust (Historic Designation Application for the Akeley Trust property), two individuals for books and The Day newspaper (for New London County Book #2). There was one request for commercial use (Friendly’s restaurant).

Susan McGee Bailey & Miss Georgiana Fulton

Two years ago at our April 2013 members meeting, Susan McGee Bailey gave a presentation on Miss Georgiana Fulton of Mason’s Island. A conversation that started over flowers bloomed into a lifelong friendship between Bailey and Fulton (1869 - 1967), who was an independent thinker, artist, and the last teacher in the one room schoolhouse on the island.

Bailey talked about the results of her research on Miss Fulton as well as the many stories she shared – stories revealing much about Mason’s Island in the 1920s and ‘30s as well as the early years of the Mystic Art Association and tantalizing aspects of Miss Fulton’s life before she came to Connecticut. Since then Bailey has continued her research on this topic, and, at my encouragement, provided us with the following article. ~ Lou Allyn

For several years I have been tracking down clues about the life of Miss Georgiana Fulton (1870-1967). ‘Fulton’, as she was known to artists in the Mystic art community, was an artist, a teacher and my first ‘best friend’. Much about her life remains unknown and/or uncertain. She was born in the Deep South, Louisiana, according to some records, Mississippi, according to others; but grew up in Shreveport, LA and lived on Mason’s Island for more than forty years. Even her name is disputed. She is variously referred to as ‘Fulton’, or as ‘Georgia’—in the identifying information under her portrait by Herbert Stoops hanging in the Mystic Noank Library—or, in other documents, as ‘Georgie’. Hugh Herbert, in an essay he wrote about boyhood encounters with her in the 1930s, refers to her as ‘Georgina ’. But she told me her name was Georgiana Fulton and others have confirmed that they also knew her as Georgiana, ‘Miss Fulton’ was the only name I ever used in addressing her and thus the name that rings truest for me. Miss Georgiana Fulton never married and followed her own, somewhat eccentric, path. She was ahead of her time in many ways, but above all she was an exceedingly independent woman in a time when independence in a woman was not necessarily valued and often viewed with suspicion.

I was eight, going on nine, the spring we first met. My family had moved to Mason’s Island from tiny East Greenbush, in upstate New York, a year and a half earlier, in November 1948. I remember considering myself quite grown up; old enough to have a friend. But while there were one or two boys my brother Hugh’s age living in our sparsely settled neighborhood on the north end of the Island, there were no girls my age nearby.

Miss Fulton’s ram-shackle cottage, hidden behind large bushes and overhanging wisteria vines, was along the dirt road to the school bus stop. An old stone well with a bucket and an iron hand pump stood to the left of the short drive.

Everyday we walked past her yard. People said she was crazy. She was much older than our parents and she lived alone, without indoor plumbing or much in the way of furniture. There were rumors of a pet turkey buried in the yard. Jonquils, violets and sweet smelling hyacinths were everywhere.

One day she was sitting on her porch. “Girl, come over here. I see you peering into my yard everyday. What are you looking at?”

The voice from behind the overgrown wisteria moved closer. She wore a long, faded dress similar to those in photos of my father’s older sisters and it swished as she walked toward the gate. Silvery gray hair escaped from a loose bun, framing her face. She wasn’t exactly smiling, but her voice had a softness that belied her abrupt words.

I stuttered, “I—I like your flowers…”

“Well, then don’t stand there like a silly, come in and look at them. But watch where you step. Tom is buried over by the hyacinths.”

The other kids scattered; my brother pulled on my arm.

Continued on p. 8
I have been to Paris several times, never without Miss Fulton’s stories echoing in my head. She talked of studying painting with artists experimenting with new techniques, and may have mentioned specific names and places. But if so, I’ve been unable to find any notes in my diaries or memories in my head.

She told me of long walks in the countryside, and of traveling to the south of France. She explained how she carried wooden shingles in her walking bag with her paintings and painted the scenery, using both sides and painting over things that weren’t “worth the wood they were painted on”.

Miss Fulton explained what impressionism was trying to achieve and why the light in Mystic was so good for painters. But when I asked her if she was going to finish the painting that stood on an easel in the room where we sat in cold weather, her reply made me sad, “Ah, child, my eyes are gone. I don’t paint any more, that’s there simply to remind me that once I wasn’t half bad.”

"Come sit on the stoop, child." 

"Well, I like my school work, most of the time...."

"Fine, then, you stop by tomorrow with your school books. I’d be interested in those books."

"OK, I will, I mean if I can...if I have time, if...."

"No ‘ifs’ girl, either you do or you don’t. I’ll be here."

And she was.

She motioned me toward the porch step. 

"Come sit on the stoop, child."

"Well, now, let me see that book."

I handed her my geography book, wondering what she wanted to see.

"Just as I thought, the illustrations in this geography are an insult a child’s native intelligence. Not a speck of a dream in the entire book." I wasn’t quite sure what she meant. Dreams were what you had at night or read about in storybooks. How could pictures be dreams?

"I’ll tell you something, child, I worked for a publisher of children’s books in New York once. I fired them."

This made even less sense. “How could you do that, you said you worked for them?"

"Ah, a stickler for detail, well, that’s not always a bad thing, I guess. Just don’t let it get in your way, it can kill the imagination."

Miss Fulton and I talked frequently for the next ten years until I went away to college, and even then I sometimes saw her when I was home on vacation. I was not the only young person she talked with, but I was the most devoted. I marveled at all the daring things she’d done and fantasized about future adventures of my own. The two of us talked about the island and the people she first knew there, about my schoolwork, about flowers, about her girlhood in Louisiana and how she left Shreveport to study art ‘up north’ and then sailed to Paris in the meridian of 1900, just as I remember her telling me. The ship docked in Liverpool on July 11th and from England she made her way to Paris, living and working there from 1883 to 1885.

The Academie Julian had always accepted female students. Twachtman might have provided an introduction for his pupil. Or Miss Fulton may have enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts that began accepting women around 1900. While in Paris, I found the original sight of the Academie Julian (which merged with the Ecole Superieure d’Arts Graphique in 1968) and tried to talk with someone at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, but the closest I managed to get was a lovely conversation over a cafe au lait in the Place de Vosages with a Harvard graduate student living in Paris. She was able to tell me what would be required to gain access to the Beaux-Arts records, which, she said, might well contain names of all former American girls who studied in Paris in the late 19th century. By the late 1890s, thousands of young American ‘girls’—today we would say young women, as few of those who traveled to Paris on their own were younger than 25—made the journey each year. Periodicals of the time warned of the dangers confronting young American women in Paris. An 1899 article in the New York Tribune argued that “some young women studying art ‘waste their time, injure their health, grow lax in their moral views and get into slatternly habits through the bohemianism that has such a glow about it.’ But the years preceding the First World War were exciting times in the Paris art world and the enthusiasm of young artists was not easily squelched.

Two years ago, using a 2005 article, ‘The American Girls Club in Paris: The Propriety and Impudence of Art Students, 1890-1914’, by Mariea Caudill Dennison as a guide, I visited most of the places the article referred to as sites where young American women had studied and lived. I have no way of knowing which, if any, of these locations Miss Fulton might have frequented, but it was fun to dream myself back a century and imagine what life might have been like for her in Paris all those years ago.

Because over the years several people, as well as an article in the New London Day, mentioned that after she returned to New York from Paris Miss Fulton studied with John Henry Twachtman, a well known American artist, I researched his background. Twachtman died in 1902. Clearly Miss Fulton studied with him before she went to Europe, and she may well have studied at Academie Julian in Paris as Twachtman himself studied there from 1883 to 1885.
students. The requirements included an official letter from a university in the U.S. vouching that I held an academic appointment and appropriate credentials. Given that I do not speak French beyond a few poorly pronounced phrases and had recently retired from my faculty position at Wellesley College, I decided I had reached the end of this particular trail. On reflection I doubt Miss Fulton studied at Beaux Arts; it was far too establishment and old school for someone interested in impressionism and the avant garde.

When the weather was nice Miss Fulton and I sat on her porch. In harsher weather we moved inside to her studio/living room, a narrow room with windows on either side. One window faced the water, the other the road. She had a chair next to the roadside window, and I realized that she could see everyone and everything that passed by. She pulled another chair across from hers the first time she asked me in. It stayed there, my chair from then on. It was a regular chair, not a child's chair, and we talked as friends. I knew she was grown up and I was not, but that never seemed very important to either of us.

She told of moving to Mystic from New York City where she had worked for Scribner's publishing house when she came back from Paris, but, based on the story she told me, was either fired or quit in a huff. Mystic had a “fine bunch of artists” she said. Besides it was half way between New York and Boston and on the train line. This must have been around 1917, but I have been unable to confirm an exact date. I thought perhaps the Mystic Art Association, founded in 1913, might have a membership record for her, although Miss Fulton never spoke about the Art Association as far as I can recall. One news article states that while friendly with many of the artists in Mystic - including Herbert Stoops who painted her portrait, Lester Boronda whose daughter, Bonnie, she tutored in arithmetic, and Garrett Price - Miss Fulton adamantly refused to join the Association. I believe this is true. Try as we might neither I nor any of the staff at the Art Association have been able to find any mention of Miss Fulton in their records nor do they own any of her paintings.

Some newspaper articles assume Miss Fulton taught in the one room schoolhouse on Mason's Island from 1917 till it closed in 1927. Town records for 1915 and 1916 show other teachers at the school, but all records between 1917 and 1922 are missing. The records for 1923 state that Doris Peckham was the teacher, but other town records show Miss Fulton renting on Mason's Island that year. It is possible the 1923 school record is incorrect — all visits by school board members to rural schools, including the one on Mason's Island stopped in 1915. The school records from the 1924 till the school closed in 1927 do list Miss Fulton as the teacher.

- To be continued in May-June issue. -
Membership Updates

Thank you all for sending in your membership renewals -- so far we have received 190 renewals. For those who have not yet renewed, we hope you will do so very soon.

~ Cindy Allyn, Membership