March: Lost & Found - The Firetruck that Kept Coming Back

By Richard Froh

Historic artifacts that remain intact while many similar objects are lost forever often have amazing survival stories. The restored 1917 American LaFrance fire engine that is often seen at Mystic parades and Mystic Seaport antique vehicle events is a classic example of such an artifact with many twists and turns in its 100-year tale – ultimately saved because of its local history.

Rich and June Froh have been closely involved with the 1917 American LaFrance fire engine serial no.1855, affectionately dubbed “ALFie”, since Richard discovered it stored at Seaport Marine in Mystic in 1987. Rich shepherded the reacquisition of the antique apparatus by the Groton Long Point Volunteer Fire Company and through six years of research, gathering parts from around the USA, and extensive restoration work, much of it which he performed.

In 1993 this old piece of fire apparatus began its “golden years” as an honored retiree, participating in many local parades and events, a national antique fire apparatus muster, and many other fire department-sponsored celebrations. Rich & June continue to enjoy driving & displaying this popular artifact and using it to teach civilians & firefighters about firefighting history.

Rich’s presentation will explore some of the many stories of how the labyrinth of unforeseen twists & turns during the restoration of this antique artifact led to so many new friendships, levels of knowledge and understanding of history and technology, and bonding with members of the local communities that the piece has served. “ALFie” will be on display, along with interesting documents and photos spanning the 100 years since this piece was placed into service in Watch Hill, RI.

Richard Froh will present the stories behind the truck, and the historic fire engine itself will be on display onsite March 28th starting at 6:30 pm at the Mystic Congregational Church Hall at Broadway & East Main, Mystic, CT. All meetings are open to the public, and new MRHS members & donations are always welcome.

April: Denizens - Captain George Denison & His Contemporaries

By Kate Dimancescu

After the publication of her second non-fiction book Denizens: A Narrative of Captain George Denison and His New England Contemporaries, author & historian Katherine Dimancescu returns Wednesday, April 25th to the Mystic River Historical Society. Come hear captivating true stories of seventeenth century men and women who lived both in New England & England and investigations into the origins of family traditions.

Ms. Dimancescu will share how Denizens presents her ancestors and their contemporaries in their own words through the research visits to English Civil War battlefields, historic archives, burial grounds, farms and museums. The presentation is a timely one as the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower’s arrival is fast approaching in 2020 – sharing the same anniversary as the baptism of Dimancescu’s ancestor, George Denison, in Bishop’s Stortford, England. Both occasions place local Stonington history in the spotlight as the Mayflower II’s restoration continues in Mystic Seaport’s shipyard and Cpt. George Denison’s namesake son and grandson married into Mayflower families. This is a presentation not to be missed as four hundred years of history are brought to life in an area where so much of the history discussed in Denizens occurred. Ms. Dimancescu hopes the presentation will inspire audience members to personally visit historic places mentioned in the book.

Katherine Dimancescu is an author and historian who divides her time between Massachusetts & Connecticut. She received a B.A. in History from Denison University and Masters’ degrees from the University of Westminster & the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is a descendant of Cpt. George Denison and both of his wives, many of Mystic’s earliest settlers including the four founders of Stonington, CT, Mayflower passengers Priscilla (Mullins) and John Alden, and two of the founders of Greenwich, CT. She is also a Denison who attended Denison University in Ohio. She discovered when writing her first book that the university was named after William S. Denison a fellow descendant of Captain George Denison.
Be Inspired by Memoirs

By Dorrie Hanna

Louisa Watrous had a great article in the last newsletter about Bettye Noyes, age 99, and her wonderful new book. We should all be inspired! Even if you never publish anything, any memories that you can record, spoken or written, will be treasures for future generations.

MRHS has in its collections a number of memoirs and diaries — such as the Fanny Morse Souvenir album pictured left. Although we have yet to publish any of them, they are still a wonderful family history resource. This summer we had a researcher visiting from New York State. We shared with him a whole packet of transcribed letters relating to his family. And narrative memoirs, diaries and letters are important for more than just family research. They reveal to us so much about life in past decades. Recently we had a request for information on the Modern Grill. Looking at pictures of that famed eating establishment reveals how much West Main Street has changed.

Check out the Virtual Exhibit pages on our website to see some of what we’re working on by way of documenting Mystic families. Virtual Exhibit is a great way for us (and you) to share family pictures and other information and it’s accessible to all, 24/7 via our website.

I should also mention another research possibility — our stacks of scrapbooks filled with news clippings from many time periods. In 2018 we’re hoping to make progress on indexing them for better access to names, dates and topics. They are a treasure trove of information and fun to browse at random, even without an index.

The Thomas Minor Diary, 1653-1684, Stonington, CT

with Kate Dimancescu

As a new planting season starts on the farms and in the fields around Stonington including the Davis Farm, author and April presenter, Kate Dimancescu encourages people to read Thomas Minor’s diary for insights into farming in Stonington in the seventeenth century, as well as practicing oral history and modern story sharing in relation to 20th & 21st century farming, such as the (Whit) Davis farmstead and other local agricultural practices.

Tip: Due to its historical significance & insight into early North American colonial life, the Thomas Minor Diary has been transcribed with original spelling & language for both literary and digital use and is also available for free reading online via Googlebooks & University of Michigan archives. Online readers can click blue text to connect and read about early Stonington farm life, deer hunting and bow wolves were a common threat to livestock.
It seemed a good idea to divide up the books - spreading each of them out over two months. (We do have lives in addition to reading these books!!)

Kate has very nicely been able to check with the lending libraries, and get their permission for us to keep "Catherine the Great" copies through the April 10th meeting date. (She also has a few more copies at the desk for those of you who still need a copy.) "The Path Between the Seas" is also an older book, so there is a good chance we will be able to keep those books for two months, as well. Consequently, our schedule is rearranged, and we will discuss these books as follows:

**March 13:** Catherine the Great, by Robert K. Massie, Part I - IV

**April 10:** Catherine the Great, Part V - end

**May 8:** Path Between the Seas, by David McCullough Chapters 1 - 10

**June 12:** Path Between the Seas, Chapters 11 - 21

**July 10:** The Man Who Loved China, by Simon Winchester, Apx. 300 pages

So we're set for quite a while! I hope this is helpful to everyone - and apologies to those who have already printed our previous schedule, but at least people might be ahead of the game, not behind!

An extra big thanks to Kate at the library for accommodating us!

The History Book Club is a partner project of the Mystic-Noank Library and MRHS. New reader members welcome at any time! Please join us on second Tuesdays at the Mystic-Noank Library at 7pm in the Activities Room. For more, please contact Richard Semeraro at rasemeraro04@gmail.com

**Virgil W. Huntley & the Gift of Passion for Local History**

Virgil Woodrow Huntley, “The Memory of Mystic”, passed away in January at age 101, having lived in Mystic since 1923. He was a founding, and 70-year member of the Hugo Simonelli Post VFW, as well as a charter member of the Mystic River Historical Society. With a life-long interest in genealogical studies and family history, Mr. Huntley was long active at both MRHS and the Huntley Family Association.

Mr. Huntley’s was passionate about the history of Mystic and recorded many of the notable events he witnessed over the years. At the age of 6 in 1922, Virgil attended the dedication of the Mystic Drawbridge when he met Connecticut’s Gov. Edward Lake. He was a long time member of the former “Bee Bee’s Breakfast Club” and a participant in an “Old Timers’ Panel”, a community retrospective event at the Mystic Congregational Church. He was feted as an “Honored Citizen” in the lead car of the 2016 Mystic Memorial Day Parade.

Mr. Huntley’s photographic chronicle of area floods, hurricanes, fires and historic homes is archived at the William Downes building of the Mystic River Historical Society, as well as in the online collections at www.mystichistory.org.

MRHS is honored & pleased to announce that Virgil Huntley has willed our organization with a very generous gift of $10,000 that will assist in continuing his passion to preserve and promote local history.

Information from Mr. Huntley’s obituary. For the full piece, please visit: dinotofuneral.com/Obituaries.htm
You may have read some articles in The Day lately about the historic importance of Stonington’s Forge Farm as well as buildings in downtown New London proposed for demolition. They started me thinking again about what is the responsibility of the Mystic River Historical Society regarding our historic school house Portersville Academy? Back in 2006 we spent $126,105 to repair severe damage to the wooden sills and joists and some exterior woodwork. Then in 2015 we spend $12,150 to repaint the exterior. This was a significant financial commitment on our part. Why did we do this?

The schoolhouse is on the National Register of Historic Places, which means that it has significance to the history of its community, state, or the nation (see below for more information about the National Register). But what is significantly important about the building? Why do we care about it and maintain it even when it just sits there most of the time. Every once in a while the Board wonders about possible uses but there are almost none because there is no heat, air conditioning, bathrooms, or handicapped access. There is electricity but only a three car parking lot. The grammar school programs faded away when the attention of local schools, students and volunteers shifted to other activities.

Sheryl Mack of Connecticut Landmarks wrote to The Day February 18, 2018 that the old Forge Farm house “required a nearly complete reconstruction to remain standing” in the four years following acquisition in 1984. She went on to say that “The house’s near total reconstruction left CTL in a difficult situation, Our good faith effort to preserve the house as an example of early American architecture resulted in the creation of a replica of a historic house, which although of undeniable local historical interest was no longer truly “historic.” This calls to mind a story I once read attributed to President Lincoln who recalled a family axe that had its head replaced several times and its shaft also but was still regarded it as the original ax. Did that ax become a replica? If so when? Likewise, when does an old school house become a replica? If it does what difference does it make?

So my question to you dear readers is this - In what ways is Portersville Academy “historic” to you, to Mystic, and what responsibility do I and the Board carry regarding its future? I would like to hear your thoughts 860-536-9363 or lallyn@snet.net or PO Box 245 Mystic.

More on Masons

If you attended Roger Read’s talk at the February 28th Membership meeting about Captain Nathaniel B. Palmer and his Masonic affiliation, or are just generally interested in the subject, Wikipedia has some informative articles. A search on Masonic Lodge takes you to this list of topics. (Disambiguation refers to the removal of ambiguity by making something clear.)

A Masonic Lodge is a basic organizational unit in Freemasonry. Masonic Lodge may also refer to one of several specific buildings:
- Masonic Lodge No. 238, Dalton, Georgia, listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP)
- Masonic Lodge (Grandin, Missouri), listed on the NRHP
- Masonic Lodge (Missoula, Montana), listed on the NRHP
- Masonic Lodge No. 472, Zaleski, Ohio, listed on the NRHP
- Masonic Lodge 570, San Angelo, Texas, listed on the NRHP
- Masonic Lodge Building (Kirkland, Washington), listed on the NRHP

See also [edit]
- Masonic Temple (disambiguation)
- Masonic Hall (disambiguation)
- Masonic Building (disambiguation)
- List of Masonic buildings Worldwide, as well as former buildings.
List is in progress and available for continued contribution.
Harvesting Ice in Stonington

By Carol Kimball, originally published in 2009, The Day

Carol Kimball was an enthusiastic member or supporter of many local historical societies and civic groups - as noted in her obituary at www.currentobituary.com/obit/79871. Her widely-enjoyed weekly columns in The Day, continued from 1985 well into 2010. We thought that it would be of interest to our members to republish some of her columns from The Day. As our thoughts turn to the warmth of spring we thought that the topic of harvesting in would provide a remembrance of January’s freeze. — Lou Allyn

A century ago, during cold winter months and before electric refrigerators, scores of men braved freezing weather harvesting and storing heavy cakes of ice needed for keeping foods cool during the summer.

Few people remember this important vanished trade*. Firsthand accounts are scarce today, though the lucrative industry once flourished across the entire northeast. Local firms harvested nearby ponds but their stories are often lost.

That’s why we’re fortunate that in 1976 Joe Vargas III, assisted by his two daughters, took time to record the story of his family’s firm of Sylvia & Vargas, which flourished from 1874 to 1947, an account he published under the title of “Stonington Ice.” And we’re doubly fortunate today that this modest informative volume, out of print for 30 years, is now republished by the Stonington Historical Society, second in a series of paperback Ramsbotham Editions honoring Capt. Robert J. Ramsbotham, longtime society president.

This slim 80-page volume, edited so competently by Betsy Wade and James Boylan, is an intriguing treasure carefully preserving the Vargas text. Boylan’s brief new foreword describes the prosperous American industry that harvested millions of tons of natural ice with ingenious skills now largely forgotten.

Happily the book’s plentiful diagrams and sharp clear photographs, some more than a century old, help to explain the complicated process of producing the cakes of ice delivered to homes in summer by faithful icemen. Harvesting ice was not haphazard. The thick ice was marked in blocks of specified dimensions, cut with gas-powered saws and conveyed up a slide into the icehouse for storage. This required 30 to 45 workers per pond, with jobs such as sawman, hookman, pikeman and storage man, all highly skilled workers. Stonington farmers gladly took these jobs in winter though the work was tough, demanding and sometimes dangerous. Ideal harvesting weather was 20 to 30 degrees above zero, with a slight northwest wind.

Work began at 4:30 a.m. These statistics make me shiver. Besides describing techniques, the book preserves the names of those hardy workers along with facsimiles of the firm’s early account books. Lists of area ice dealers are included, with summer delivery routes, providing a compelling picture of a now forgotten industry. It’s a vivid portrayal of a bygone day and a fine addition to the local history bookshelf.

I had a number of friends, but Malcolm McDonald was perhaps my best friend in grammar school. He often came to the farm and we played such games as follow the leader, which could get hair. I remember once Malcolm and I went trout fishing at the Cheeseboro Pond. We were not having much luck so we decided to play follow the leader on the big ice house Cheeseboro owned. It was three stories high with long entrance gangways, each about 8-10 feet high. One would drop from one gangway to another when playing follow the leader if you were lucky enough to catch the gangway below you. So, we were playing and Malcolm was the leader. He missed the gangway below and dropped straight down about 20 feet. He was badly shaken but walked home. There it was discovered that he had several broken ribs. Before electric refrigerators, natural ice was harvested in the winter and placed into icehouses. Since we had an icehouse, we used this for our home icebox as well as to ice down the milk bottles on our wagons and later, on our delivery trucks. Icemen delivering ice to homes were as much a part of the culture as were the milkmen, maimen, etc. Since many iceboxes had different dimensions, the ice block had to be chipped to size. Here is where the ice wagon was a boon to kids on a hot day. They would follow the ice wagon and take the ice chips to suck on to keep cool. I’ve done it many times. Just as a matter of interest, Northern Schooners frequently loaded ice blocks, covered them with sawdust and sailed to Southern ports where the ice was sold.

There was also a joke about icemen which I remember. An iceman was delivering ice on his route when a lady opened her window and called to him, "Iceman, do you have the time?" "Yes mam," he says, "If someone will hold my horse!"

See also our MRHS online book Back When by Karl H. Inderfurth - www.mystichistory.org/digital_publications/Back_When.pdf

* For a full-color peek into the ice harvesting tradition continuing today, also visit the Yankee Magazine article, Ice Harvest at the Thompson Ice House in South Bristol, Maine.
January 2018 Meeting Minutes ---

The Board of Trustees of the Mystic River Historical Society met on Monday, January 22, 2018. Attendees were: Cindy Allyn, Lou Allyn, Margaret Austin, John Parry, Richard Semeraro, Lois Glazier, Stephanie Thorp, and Barry Thorp. The meeting was called to order at 7pm by President L. Allyn.

President (L. Allyn): The Board was welcomed back after the December break.

Secretary (L. Allyn for E. Holland): A motion was made, seconded & passed to accept the November 2017 meeting minutes.

Treasurer (B. Thorp): For the period 21 December 2017 - 21 January 2018, as well as some year-end perspective for review, all deposits have been made in the bank and all bills are paid current. Account books are reconciled with the Chelsea Groton Bank statements. Expenses for this period are mostly non-discretionary commitments that include payments for utilities, snow plowing & to our curatorial staff. No unusual expenses for the period. Deposits included receipt of 2017 member annual donations and imaging fees. Expenses include utilities payments, snow removal, a contractor payment, and speaker fees.

• The present balance in the Chelsea Groton checking account is positive. The current P&L vs Budget and Balance Sheet reports for the period since last Board meeting are attached to Treasurer’s Report. Also included is a P&L and a Balance Sheet for the end of the 2017 year. 1099 forms have been issued and the 990 Tax Return for 2017 is being prepared. • A motion was made, seconded and passed to accept the Treasurer’s Report.

Curatorial (D. Hanna): The January meeting of the committee was canceled. The Downes Building was closed on January 4 due to the snow storm. The Mystic Flag Committee has donated a box of their organizational files and we are processing this material. The Committee will next meet on February 12th.

Finance (L. Allyn): The Vanguard funds continue to do well. Our policy is to invest dividends and interest from all Vanguard funds into a Money Market Fund.

Information Technology (S. Thorp): Computer updates and backups performed on 5 January 2018. Backup files were moved offsite for secure storage. Application & security software were updated and are current & all equipment is operating properly at this time. Networked operation of each computer was checked and found to be in good condition. No problem with the printer connection to the Laser multi-function printer with the computers was encountered. The latest PastPerfect software update was installed.

Lower Mystic Cemetery (L. Allyn): Marilyn Comrie, who will be joining the Board, is recovering from a serious auto accident.

Membership (C. Allyn): Life member Leonard Reid died. A large number of 2018 membership renewals have been received. Dues, gifts and Newsletter Patron receipts are already close to half the budget for the year.

MNL History Book Club (R. Semeraro): The History Book Club has recently read “Rogue Heroes” and will discuss “Defenders of the Faith” in February.

Newsletter: (L. Allyn for J. Pryor) The online color edition of the January/February edition of the Portersville Press has been emailed and posted to our website, the postal mailing will go out next week.

Programs (M. Austin): February 28 – Roger Read “Captain Nathaniel Palmer: His intriguing life”
March 28 – Rich Froh “Lost and Found: The fire Truck that Wouldn’t Go Away. The 1917 American LaFrance fire engine.”
April 25 – Kate Dimancescu & her new book "Denizens: A Narrative of Captain George Denison and His New England Contemporaries”
May 23 – Lou Allyn “The History of Enders Island”
World War I ended on November 11, 1918; we are looking into related speaker for the fall meetings

Chamber of Commerce (S. Menno), Social Media (L. Pyrke-Fairchild): No reports. • New Business: None. Meeting adjourned at 7:35pm. Next meeting is February 26, 7pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Lou Allyn for Elizabeth Holland, Secretary

~ The MRHS Board does not meet in December. ~

November 2017 Meeting Minutes ---

The Board of Trustees of the Mystic River Historical Society met on Monday, November 20, 2017. Attendees were: Cindy Allyn, Lou Allyn, Margaret Austin, Lyndsey Pyrke-Fairchild, John Parry, Richard Semeraro, Stephanie Thorp, Barry Thorp, Steve Menno and Jennifer Pryor. The meeting was called to order at 7pm by President L. Allyn.

President (L. Allyn): A motion was made/seconded and passed to accept the proposed 2018 budget.
Painting of the Downes Building will begin shortly.

Secretary (L. Allyn for E. Holland): A motion was made, seconded and passed to accept the October meeting minutes.

Treasurer (B. Thorp): For activities during 17 October - 19 November 2017, all deposits have been made in the bank, all bills are paid current, and books are reconciled with the Chelsea Groton Bank statements. Expenses for this period are mostly non-discretionary commitments that include payments for utilities, meeting speaker fees, a newsletter printing, and to our curatorial staff. No unusual expenses for the period. Deposits exceeded expenses for this period. A transfer of funds from the MRHS investment Money Account to the Chelsea Groton Bank checking account was made to cover operating expenses during the remaining weeks of this fiscal year. • The present balance in the Chelsea Groton checking account is positive. Attached are the current P&L vs Budget and Balance Sheet reports. Comments or questions are welcome as always. • A motion was made, seconded and passed to accept the Treasurer’s Report.

Chamber of Commerce (S. Menno) Steve is working with Dorrie and the Chamber of Commerce to provide photographs for their office.

Curatorial (D. Hanna): The Curatorial Committee met on Nov 13. The Usage Policy for images and published material was agreed upon and will be presented to the Board. The office will be closed November 21 to 23 and December 19 to 28. Various other topics were discussed and the calendar of meeting dates for 2018 was approved. A motion was made, seconded and passed to adopt Policies for Use of the Mystic River Historical Societies Collections.
Information Technology (S. Thorp): The System Administrator performed computer updates and backups on 12 November 2017. Backup files were moved offsite for secure storage. Application and security software were updated and are current. iTunes was updated on MRHS3. All equipment is operating properly at this time as well. Networked operation of each computer was checked and found to be in good condition. No problem with the printer connection to the Laser multi-function printer with the computers was encountered. • The HP printer has been retired due to lack of need plus a savings on operating and maintenance costs.

Lower Mystic Cemetery (L. Allyn): Flags in poor condition at veterans’ graves were replaced with new nylon flags before Veterans Day. The following Sunday all flags were removed. William Lewis of Mystic asked assistance in determining the location of the grave of Eleanor Lucy (18891 – 1965), the wife of his uncle John Fillmore Lucy. He wishes to place a marker in the family plot for her. Soundings with a metal rod indicated that there is a coffin between the grave of John and Elwood Lewis. Dinoto Funeral Home did not have records going back that far. They did ask if any vacant plots were available for sale. An attempt will be made to trace the families that purchased 5 plots and never used them.

Membership (C. Allyn): Past member Marjorie Moore died in Rhode Island.

MNL History Book Club (R. Semeraro): Historic Book Club meetings are going well with 8 to 10 participants at each meeting. All Board members are encouraged to attend at least one meeting each year.

Newsletter: (L. Allyn for J. Pryor) The deadline for copy for the January/February issue is December 15th. Online readers are encouraged to use the blue hotlinks for further information.

Programs (M. Austin): The program schedule is:
December 6 Joanna Case and Judy Hicks - “The Cemetery Ladies - Recording the History Buried in Our Cemeteries”
February 28 Roger Read - Free Masons: A part of Mystic History
March 28 Rich Froh - History of Mystic Fires” and a vintage fire truck on display
April 25 Kate Dimancescu - her new book "Denizens: A Narrative of Captain George Denison & His New England Contemporaries"
May 23 Lou Allyn - The History of Enders Island
October 23 Catherine Deichmann - World War I 1918-1919

Social Media (L. Pyrke-Fairchild): Facebook “likes” continue to grow each month.

Finance (L. Allyn): No report.

New Business: None.

Meeting adjourned at 7:55pm. Next meeting is January 22, 7pm, Mystic Noank Library.

Respectfully submitted,
Lou Allyn for Elizabeth Holland, Secretary
**Events Calendar**

7pm Wednesday, March 28th, 2018
History of Mystic Fires + Vintage Firetruck - Richard Froh
7pm refreshments & socializing, 7:30p program
Mystic Congregational Church Hall, Broadway & E. Main, Mystic
Local fire history & the truck that keeps coming back.

7pm Tuesday, April 10th, 2017
History Book Club - MRHS & MNL Partnership
Catherine the Great, Part V - end

7pm Wednesday, April 25th, 2018
Denizens: A Narrative of Cpt. George Denison & His New England Contemporaries with Kate Dimancescu
From her book - ancestors & their contemporaries in their words via battlefields, historic archives, burial grounds, farms and museums.

7pm Tuesday, May 8th, 2018
Path Between the Seas, by David McCullough Chapters 1 - 10

7pm Wednesday, May 23rd, 2018
History of Enders Island with Lou Allyn

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**Newsletter/Print Patrons**
The Editor apologizes for the incorrectly printed Patron List in the recent issue. Our accurate list is as follows:

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

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**Membership Updates**

Members Leonard Reid and Virgil Huntley have recently passed away.
Please see inside, page three, for more about Virgil Huntley.

-- Cindy Allyn, Membership