March: Outback, or, Is This Necessary? with Virginia Williams

This tidy outhouse at the Nathan Fuller House in Higganum, CT was part of a spring 2017 Historic Privy Tour.
From director26, Hartford Courant Community Contributor, April 11, 2017

Biffie, duck, dunnie, willie, grandpaw... Virginia Williams has found over seventy-five names for outhouses and has two hundred slides of them. She has been dubbed the Outhouse Lady, and even the Ansel Adams of Outhouses by Yankee Magazine. Williams has followed her unique interest for many years — documenting & making presentations along the way, because, as she has said, “someday they will all be gone and, you know, you show kids a rotary phone these days and they haven’t a clue.” Join us for a light-hearted look at the history and folklore of that necessary little structure outback. Nearly everyone has an outhouse story to share, so bring yours along to share during the Q&A.

Virginia Williams has photographed and studied outhouses and privies since 1980. She has presented programs on the Delta Queen Steam Boat, at Ball State University, as well as to civic groups, church groups, and historical societies. In 2000, she was the marshal of the Outhouse Parade in Gravel Switch, KY, where she received the Crescent Moon Award.

April: The 1918 Influenza Epidemic with Dr. Arcari

Crowded hospital corridors like the above were a common sight at the height of the epidemic in July & August of 1918. From the Connecticut Historical Society, Gift of Mrs. Fritz W. Baldwin

Connecticut’s many ports offered entry points for disease, including, particularly, the New London Naval Base in Groton, where returning soldiers could carry illnesses from the trenches of WWI.

Influenza & Pneumonia Deaths from September 1 - December 28, 1918 peaked at 1700 in October in the state. Image from The Day

Over 100 years ago, in September 1918, an influenza pandemic that was spreading all over the world arrived in Connecticut. Following a deceptively less dramatic outbreak in the preceding spring, the pandemic raged across the state for 90 days. The virulent disease, for which there was neither a cure nor a preventative vaccine, claimed the lives of 8,500 Connecticut residents; it killed more than half a million people in the US and as many as 100 million around the globe.

Dr. Ralph D. Arcari, MLS, MA, Ph.D., is retired Library Director and professor of medical history at the University of Connecticut Health Center and School of Medicine.

All meetings are free & open to the public with donations welcome. Please join us on Wednesday March 27th and April 24th at 7pm at the Mystic Congregational Church Hall, at Broadway & E. Main streets, Mystic.
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:   President - Lou Allyn  • Vice President - Margaret Austin •  Treasurer - Barry Thorp  • Corresponding & Recording 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

Copy deadline is the 3rd Friday of the month prior to issue publication. Please submit to jenniferspryor@gmail.com

Want to see images from Mystic’s past? Go to our website [www.mystichistory.org] and click on the link on the right hand side of the home page: “Virtual Exhibits.” This will take you a delightful selection of photographs and other items from out collections.

Largely through the efforts of our Curatorial Assistant Louisa Watrous, we’ve been creating Virtual Exhibits for nearly 10 years, but we thought it was time to remind everyone about this great resource. We can develop exhibits without physical space concerns and share our materials electronically to everyone.

While old photographs of Mystic scenes are, perhaps, the most frequently viewed, the family exhibits are amazing! Photos of nearly 20 different families are presented and we are always hoping that folks will share. “Send us your family material to include in the collection and save your history for posterity!” is the tag line on each family exhibit.

The most recent addition to our collection, and to our Virtual Exhibits, is material relating to Albert Crary Burrows that is being graciously donated by Carol and Carl Sommer in memory of his sister. Louisa has been working with the Sommers on these items and has already posted more than 30 photographs of this family. We are fortunate that Carol and Carl are able to share the stories behind the images.

Want a closer look? ZOOM in on text & photos by pressing “command”/Mac or “control”/PC and the “+” key!

History Book Club Selections

~ Dana & Richard Semeraro

The following books that have been selected for the next several months by a vote of The Historic Book Club. Since the last two are longer, we have designated them to be discussed over two monthly sessions each. Since they are also the newest books, we have put them last, which gives the Library a better chance of borrowing them from other libraries.


May 14 - Measuring America: How an Untamed Wilderness Shaped the United States and Fulfilled the Promise of Democracy, Andro Linklater, 2002 (320 pp)

June 11 - Fascism: A Warning, Madeleine Albright, 2018 (288 pp)

July 9 - American Eden: David Hosack, Botany and Medicine in the Garden of the Early Republic, Victoria Johnson, 2018 (480 pp) - 1st half

August 13 - American Eden - 2nd half to end

September 10 - These Truths: A History of the United States, Jill Lepore, 2018 (933 pp) - 1st half

October 8 - These Truths - 2nd half to end

In connection with our March reading, Richard wrote an article on John Mason and the Pequot War for the Portersville Press in 2014, which may be of interest. It can be found at www.mystichistory.org

The History Book Club is a partner project of the Mystic-Noank Library and MRHS The group meets on second Tuesdays at the Mystic-Noank Library at 7pm in the Activities Room and new reader members are always welcome. For more information, please contact Richard Semeraro at rasemeraro04@gmail.com

Virtual Exhibits Continue to Grow

~ Dorrie Hanna

Want to see images from Mystic’s past? Go to our website [www.mystichistory.org] and click on the link on the right hand side of the home page: “Virtual Exhibits.” This will take you a delightful selection of photographs and other items from out collections.

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Two eras of Burrows for posterity from MRHS Albert Crary Burrows Collection:

L: A.C. [Albert Crary] Burrows, Jr., age 4, in a sophisticated pose, 19th C., small sepia print

R: Albert Crary Burrows, 19th C., portion of sepia print, mounted on board, photographed by E. A. Scholfield, Mystic River, Conn.

Want a closer look? ZOOM in on text & photos by pressing “command”/Mac or “control”/PC and the “+” key!
January 2019 Meeting Minutes

The Board of Trustees of the Mystic River Historical Society met on Monday, January 14, 2019. Attendees were Cindy Allyn, Lou Allyn, Margaret Austin, Marilyn Comrie, Steve Menno, John Parry, Lyndsey Pyrke-Fairchild, Richard Semeraro, Stephanie Thorp, and Barry Thorp. The meeting was called to order at 7:00pm by President L. Allyn.

President (L. Allyn): We are collaborating with the Stonington Historical Society to publicize each other’s events to our members. Lyndsey will email our announcements and the Portersville Press to them.

Recording Secretary (L. Allyn): A motion was made, seconded and passed to accept the minutes of the November 2018 meeting.

Corresponding Secretary (L. Holland): Two letters were written.

Treasurer (B. Thorp): For activities during 20 November 2018 to 14 January 2019, all deposits have been made in the Chelsea account and all bills paid current. The treasurer’s account books are reconciled with the Chelsea Groton Bank statements. Expenses for this period are non-discretionary commitments that include payments for utilities, speaker gift cards, hall fees, Mystic Chamber dues and curatorial staff payments. There were no unusual expenses during this period. Deposits included receipt of 2018 member annual dues, a Patron donation and other donations. Additionally, a second amount of $3000.00 was transferred (as planned in the 2018 budget) from the Vanguard Money Market account to Chelsea checking to cover utility payments. There were no unusual expenses during this period. Deposits for this period exceeded expenses and included receipt of 2019 member annual dues, Patron donations and other unrestricted donations. Please note that the 2019 Budget approved at the last Board meeting has been included in the P&L report for this month. The 2018 Form 990 has been completed, reviewed by the President, and sent to the IRS for acceptance. A motion was made, seconded and passed to accept the Treasurer’s Report.

Chamber of Commerce (S. Menno): No activity.

Curatorial (D. Hanna): The Curatorial Committee met on January 14. An informal report for 2018 was given by Collections Manager Dorrie Hanna: 95 visitors (not including those on MRHS business) • 42 queries via email • 26 queries via phone • 32 queries from visitors • 17 queries via Facebook • 7+ image requests were old enough that downloading Microsoft updates has become problematic and extremely time- consuming. Backup files were moved offsite for secure storage. On 11/7/18 he replaced batteries in all three computer mouse units. On 11/23/18 he updated Past Perfect to version 5.0.2 on all computers. All three computers received a security & application software update. All equipment & networking and printer connection is operating properly and in good condition. • A $4,000 grant application to replace our old computers (two desktop and a laptop) was submitted to the Charles B. Allyn Foundation. • An attempt to reattach the back of the computer table was unsuccessful; a new desk was purchased from Staples and assembled by Barry and Lou.

Lower Mystic Cemetery (L. Allyn) No activity.

Membership (C. Allyn): 280 membership renewal letters for 2019 were mailed in January. Bill Pryor joined as a new family member.


Newsletter (L. Allyn for J. Pryor): Copy is due Feb. 22 for the March/April issue.

Programs (M. Austin): Upcoming meetings are: February 27th, 2019 – Craig Edwards - “Traditional Maritime Fiddle Music of New England in the 1800’s” • March 22nd, 2019 – To be determined. A possible topic is the 19th amendment which granted women the right to vote and was passed by Congress June 4, 1919, and ratified on August 18, 1920 • April 24th, 2019 - Dr. Ralph D. Arcari PhD, UCONN School of Medicine - “The 1918 influenza Epidemic” in CT

Social Media (L. Pyrke-Fairchild): Harley Head Brewing @barleyheadbrewery posted on Instagram www.instagram.com/p/BzdZ4bA71b/ a photo provided by MRHS of “The Standard Machinery Co, 1924, New Factory Square. The stairs on the left mark where the entrance to Harley Head Brewery is today, though the stairs today go down instead of up.”

Walking Tour (Marilyn Comrie): Being planned for the last Saturday in April. She is also trying to find out who is responsible for maintaining the shrubbery around the WWI monument at the intersection of New London Road and Library Street.

Meeting adjourned at 7:55 pm. Next is February 11, 2019 7pm at Mystic Noank Library. Respectfully submitted, Lou Allyn

There is no Board meeting in December.

February 2019 Meeting Minutes

The Board of Trustees of the Mystic River Historical Society met on Monday, February 11, 2019. Attendees were: Cindy Allyn, Lou Allyn, Margaret Austin, Marilyn Comrie, Steve Menno, John Parry, Richard Semeraro, Stephanie Thorp and Barry Thorp. The meeting was called to order at 7:00pm by President L. Allyn.

President (L. Allyn): We are collaborating with the Stonington Historical Society to publicize this month’s meeting. Publicity has been sent to Bob Suppicich.

Recording Secretary (L. Allyn): A motion was made, seconded and passed to accept the minutes of the January 2019 meeting.

Corresponding Secretary (L. Holland): Fourteen thank you letters were written including those for gifts in Memory of Paul Ingle.

Treasurer (B. Thorp): For treasurer’s activities during the period 15 January to 11 February 2019, all deposits have been made in the Chelsea account and all bills are paid current. The treasurer’s account books are reconciled with the Chelsea Groton Bank statements. • Expenses for this period are non-discretionary commitments that include payments for utilities, CLHO dues, payment of the annual Bulk Mail Permit #17 and curatorial staff payments. There were no unusual expenses during this period. Deposits for this period exceeded expenses and included receipt of 2019 member annual dues, Patron donations and other unrestricted donations. Please note that the 2019 Budget approved at the last Board meeting has been included in the P&L report for this month. The 2018 Form 990 has been completed, reviewed by the President, and sent to the IRS for acceptance. A motion was made, seconded and passed to accept the Treasurer’s Report.

Chamber of Commerce (S. Menno): No activity.

Curatorial (D. Hanna): The Committee met on January 14 and Dorrie provided an update on various activities. Images were provided to author Gail MacDonald and to Geoff Gordon for his new BeeBee Dairy website. Carol & Carl Sommer brought in the first batch of Burrows material that they are donating. We are switching to a bi-monthly meeting schedule so the next meeting will be March 18.

Finance (L. Allyn): No report.

Information Technology (S. Thorp): A check for $2,600 was received from the Charles B. Allyn Foundation in response to our grant application to purchase two new desktop computers. A request will now be submitted for money to replace our old laptop computer. Rather than purchase Microsoft Office products a recommendation was made and accepted to use an “Open Office” product; a choice will be made from several available. • The System Administrator performed computer updates and backups on 1 & 2 February 2019. It should be noted that our computers are old enough that downloading Microsoft updates has become problematic and extremely time-consuming. Backup files were moved offsite for secure storage. All three computers received a security & application software update. All equipment & networking and printer connection is operating properly and in good condition. • A $4,000 grant application to replace our old computers (two desktop and a laptop) was submitted to the Charles B. Allyn Foundation. • An attempt to reattach the back of the computer table was unsuccessful; a new desk was purchased from Staples and assembled by Barry and Lou.

Lower Mystic Cemetery (L. Allyn) No activity.

Membership (C. Allyn): 282 membership renewal letters for 2019 were mailed in January. Paul Ingle and Paul Simoncini died.

Mystic Noank Library (R. Semararo): Future readings are Homegrown Terror by Eric Lehman for February and A History of Mystic, CT, from Pequot Village to Tourist Town, by Leigh Fought in March.

Newsletter (L. Allyn for J. Pryor): Copy is due Feb. 22 for the March/April issue.

Programs (M. Austin): Upcoming meetings are: February 27th, 2019 – Craig Edwards – “Traditional Maritime Fiddle Music of New England in the 1800’s” • March 22nd, 2019 – To be determined. A possible topic is the 19th amendment which granted women the right to vote and was passed by Congress June 4, 1919, and ratified on August 18, 1920 • April 24th, 2019 - Dr. Ralph D. Arcari PhD, UCONN School of Medicine - “The 1918 influenza Epidemic” in CT • May 22th, 2019 – To Be Determined

Social Media (L. Pyrke-Fairchild): We continue to post on Instagram and Facebook. Our next program has been shared on Facebook and to the Westerly Sun and The Day. Instagram posts advertising the program are forthcoming. All of that and our recent Portersville Press has been shared with the Stonington Historical Society for cross-promotion.

Walking Tour (Marilyn Comrie): The tour is planned for 10:00 a.m. April 27th with a rain date of May 4th.

Meeting adjourned at 7:55 pm. Next is March 18, 2019 7pm at Mystic Noank Library. Respectfully submitted, Lou Allyn
The Mystic River Historical Society and the Mystic and Noank Library will sponsor “A Walk Through Helen Clarke’s Mystic” at 10 a.m. Saturday, April 27.

The hour-long walk will start at the Union Baptist Church parking lot and will feature a look at the Mystic of 100 years ago, based on the writings of Helen Clarke, whose diary the society published in 1997. Marilyn Comrie, a former historical society president who transcribed the diary for the society in 1995, will lead the walk, which will be limited to 20 people. Registration for the free walk is required and must be done by April 15 at eventkeeper via the library website event calendar at mysticnoanklibrary.org. The parking lot at Union Baptist has been reserved for parking for those who sign up for the walk. Rain date will be Saturday, May 4.

Helen Clarke was born in Mystic on Sept. 17, 1905. In 1915, when she was just 11, she started writing a diary. In one of her earliest entries, she writes: I am eleven going on twelve and in the 6th grade at Mystic Academy. I have been reading about a girl who kept a diary and I am going to do so likewise, with dates and everything... When girls in books start diaries exciting things start to happen right off the bat. I hope it works for me, oh I certainly do hope so. I shall make this as replete with descriptions, conversation and antidotes as my life will allow.

Helen was true to her word. She kept a diary for her whole life. After her death in 1989, the historical society was fortunate to have Helen’s husband, Dorrance Grimes, offer her diaries to us. We took the portions of her diaries from the time she lived in Mystic, 1915 to 1926. The society published these writings in a book titled “An Account of My Life, The Childhood Journals of Helen May Clarke of Mystic, Connecticut” to celebrate the society’s 25th anniversary in 1998.

The April 27 walk will feature the people and places that dominated Helen’s life when she was a child. She was descended from one of Mystic’s founding families, something her family was very proud of and a fact she referred to often in the diary. She writes: We are one of the oldest families, having been in New England for hundreds of years, before that we were English, which is the only thing you can be and not be a foreigner. Grandma boasts there is no foreign blood in our veins. Her people were Burrowses. Robert Burrows was one of the first settlers of Mystic. Papa’s people are from Rhode Island. The Clarkes just about made Newport in Rhode Island. He and Grandma are always arguing about their families. When I do anything wrong Grandma says I am “clear Clarke” and Papa says “that’s the Almighty Burrows in you.” Grandma’s family ran to sea captains. There was great grandfather Rhodes Burrows, great, great grandfather Capt. Daniel, great, great grandfather Daniel the first.

Please make plans to join us for the walk and discover where Helen and her family lived, and the homes of the people she writes about and the places she frequented as a child. The walk will start at Union Baptist, because that is the church Helen attended. We will travel up High Street past homes of Helen’s family and friends and then down Academy Lane to where Helen went to school and into downtown to see how any of the buildings where she shopped and played are still here. See you then!
**Helen & the Influenza Epidemic**

Looking back at the Mystic of 100 years ago, diarist Helen Clarke writes about her bout with the flu in 1919, when she was 13 years old. Although the excerpt is short on details how the pandemic affected Mystic, it gives an insight into how people medicated themselves when sickness hit. This diary entry is for July 1, 1919.

It was Spanish “flu” I had, short for influenza. There was an epidemic of it and many people died. No one else in my Family had it, I am glad to say. Grandma took me in hand and slapped mustard plasters on my chest, salt pork around my throat and a horrible ointment which smelted like skunk oil, though she says “no,” all over me. I don’t mean all at once, but at one time or another. I was not fit for human eyes to rest upon and smelled simply vile. I was so sick Jerry said he actually worried. Grandma says I have a tough spot somewhere and that must be true else I would not have survived all that was done to me. Even now I have to act lively all the time or she thinks I am fixing for a sick spell and starts in on me.

When I was on my feet again, she started to build me up which was very wearing as I do not like herb teas or Sulphur and molasses. Personally I do not believe the dear Lord ever meant Sulphur and molasses to go together. I had several bad colds in succession and felt like something dragged thru a knot-hole, so she fed me sirup of onions which is too vile to be put into words without blasphemy. Since then I have been alright, although they say I look liked a picked chicken and I certainly hope I stay well.

I don’t mind the Doctor because he lives things up when he comes, besides generally speaking, his medicine is not a circumstance to Grandma’s remedies. She does not think a thing will work unless it smells and tastes like Old Nick. Mother is not old fashioned, but when Constance and I are sick, Grandma sails right in and doses us. She thinks people should be on their feet if not laid up and has no patience for shilly-shallying. Great Aunt Mary Jane has a very awful remedy she is forever forcing down our throats. It is castor-oil and rhubarb which has a blasphemous taste. If someone liked it she would not tell Mama this time, but it must never happen again, she would not tell Mama this time, but it must never happen again, things like that being upsetting to a woman of her age. It was very just of her because when she complains about Constance or me Mama thinks she has more rights to me than a visiting Grandmother, or so. I always make sure no one is in it before I do it now.

Grandma has more rights to me than a visiting Grandmother, because she has been with me since I let out my first squall in her front chamber. Mother was very sick and Grandmother took me in hand and has never let up. I was puny, although I weighed six pounds to start with, because I lost weight long after I should have been gaining. She says they never expected to bring me up. Grandma lost two little girls with dysentery and cholera infantum and she fought hard not to lose me. I had to have a special cow. I am not strong enough to push it over which I do not want to do anyway, but sometimes I can rock it back and forth if I shove extra hard. I know it is not ladylike but it is a great temptation.

Well, this day I had it teetering a little when the door opened and Grandma stepped out. Her hat was crocked and she was mad. My stars, I liked to of died then and there, I went stiff all over. I said, “Oh my, I didn’t know you were in there.” She said she calledat I didn’t have, how many times had I been told not to do it, if she could not have peace and privacy there, where could she have it short of the burying ground and even then she wouldn’t put it past me to push her tombstone over. I was agast and said “Please go back and I will not touch it again.”

“I have lost the notion,” she said majestically. She looked sort of skewge and I asked if it had hurt her any and she said, “Only my dignity, I guess.” Then she said she guessed I had had a scare too by the looks of me and she would not tell Mama this time, but it must never happen again, things like that being upsetting to a woman of her age. It was very just of her because when she complains about Constance or me Mama thinks she must get after us and worst of all not let us go up there for a day or so. I always make sure no one is in it before I do it now.

Our thanks to Collections Manager, Dorrie Hanna, for recognizing & submitting Ms. Clarke’s timely quote.

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**Helen & the Privy**

The most honest insights to an era can come from the voice of its youth, as Helen May Clarke exemplifies in the MRHS publication An Account of My Life: The Childhood Journals of Helen May Clarke of Mystic, Connecticut, 1915-1926. It offers a vision of Mystic in the early 1900s, as well as a quip for our March speaker, Virginia Williams’ collection!

...Like the time I tipped the privy. The lege runs along side and I kind of like to sit on a flat part of it and my feet against the side and push. I am not strong enough to push it over which I do not want to do anyway, but sometimes I can rock it back and forth if I shove extra hard. I know it is not ladylike but it is a great temptation.

**Editor’s Note:** The Helen May Clarke diary is a true reflection of her era, culture and age. Please be aware that it is unedited for grammar or modern standards of sociopolitical correctness.
Silas Deane’s name is not one of the better known in our history. I’m willing to bet that outside of our local area of Connecticut, few students of history have any idea of his life or his contributions to the cause of the American Revolution. In our travels, we see a Silas Deane Road in Ledyard, CT, a Silas Deane Highway in Rocky Hill; a Silas Deane Elementary School in Wethersfield; and Silas Deane Pawn Shops in Wethersfield and Manchester. But who was Silas Deane?

One of the books that the History Book Club at Mystic-Noank Library has studied is Homegrown Terror: Benedict Arnold and the Burning of New London, by Eric Lehman. I had picked up the book somewhere, along with the Nathaniel Philbrick book, Valiant Ambition: George Washington, Benedict Arnold, and the Fate of the American Revolution, and I thought it would be interesting to read both and compare their perspectives.

I mentioned my interest during an MRHS Board Meeting, and found myself volunteering to write an article about Silas Deane. This led to a visit to the Groton Public Library, where I checked out two more books: Silas Deane, Patriot or Traitor? by Coy Hilton James, and Unlikely Allies: How a Merchant, a Playwright, and a Spy Saved the American Revolution, by Joel Richard Paul. And I read them both.

The historians who wrote all four books were unanimous in their evaluation of Deane. So here’s his story.

Silas Deane was born in Groton, CT, in December 1737. Since it wasn’t until 1836 that the northern part of Groton was split away by the state legislature to become the separate town of Ledyard, it is reasonable to assume that Silas was born in what later became Ledyard.

He was the youngest son of a blacksmith, but he was such a promising boy that his father went to the trouble of getting him admitted to Yale University. He eventually passed the bar exam and practiced briefly as a lawyer. After a few years, he married a wealthy widow in Wethersfield, Mehitable Evards, daughter of a former Connecticut governor. While Silas was in Philadelphia, helping to establish the framework of an independent nation, his family and his business back in Wethersfield missed his hand at the helm.

Silas was, interestingly, involved in planning Benedict Arnold’s attack on Ft. Ticonderoga in 1775. When word was received in the Continental Congress of the victory (as unillustrious as the victory might have been), he was credited as one of the “strategic architects” thereof, even though he had violated the law by misappropriating money from the Connecticut treasury to underwrite Arnold’s mission.

By early 1776, Congress had decided that it was time to approach France for help. Even though Connecticut had found fault with Silas and replaced him, Congress selected him to travel to France as their representative. It was a difficult decision for Silas...his family needed his attention; he had been away from home a long time; his wife was in poor health; his son Jesse was just a toddler. But he believed so much in the Revolution that he agreed to accept the commission.

Off to France went Silas. He spoke not a word of French. Congress had established no guidelines for diplomatic performance. Congress had no power to tax, so all they could do was print money, which quickly became worthless. They wanted Silas to buy military supplies such as cannons, balls, uniforms, and guns, but they gave him nothing to pay for them with. This meant that Silas had to use his own money to live on, and to negotiate with.

In spite of all this, Silas got off to a good start. He managed to meet France’s Foreign Minister, Comte de Vergennes. He wanted to meet with the king, Louis XVI, but that didn’t happen for a long time. Louis was an extremely cautious and not very decisive king, and more than anything, he wanted to avoid another war with England, especially as France hadn’t recovered from the last war with England.

In the course of events, Silas met a fellow named Beaumarchais, who acted throughout Silas’ entire time in France as his point of contact with de Vergennes. Beaumarchais had been born Pierre-Augustin Caron and later added ‘de Beaumarchais’ to his name after he married his first wife (her estate was called Beaumarchais, or ‘beautiful walk’). He was a watchsmith who had invented what became known as the Caron Escapement, that allowed wrist watches to lie flat against the wrist instead of their previous spherical form. He was a playwright, who wrote the story for “The Barber of Seville”, and was musically talented. It wasn’t until he got involved in arms trading with Silas Deane that he found his (apparently) true calling.

When Silas went to France, the colonies had not yet declared war. So Silas had to be quite circum-

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Groton/Ledyard Connecticut Native, Silas Deane (1737 - 1789) portrait by William Johnston, 1766. From Wikipedia.

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~ Stephanie Thorp
spect in his efforts to get military supplies. He didn’t learn about the war declaration until months after the event. The first letter to him went down with a ship, and the second letter, entrusted to the captain of another ship, nearly went into the trash because the ship’s captain in question forgot about it.

After Silas had been in France for some time, the Continental Congress sent Benjamin Franklin to join him. Franklin was quite the bon vivant and spent most of his time socializing and politicking, while Silas focused on war materiel. And still later on, the Continental Congress decided to send a fellow named Arthur Lee, part of a huge Lee family in Virginia, from his station in London to join Silas and Franklin in Paris.

Now we come to the viper in the ointment. Arthur Lee was the youngest of several brothers. The family was extensive and considered themselves to be local nobility and above the local crowd back in Virginia. They were effectively a cabal, and were very much ‘one for all and all for one’.

The family was extensive and considered themselves to be local nobility and above the local crowd back in Virginia. They were effectively a cabal, and were very much ‘one for all and all for one’. Arthur was an unpleasant guy; he was angry all the time, and jealous, and hated and resented everyone around him. Plus, he had a loose grip on the truth. But his family backed him at every turn, no matter what, and effectively, too, because several of them were members of the Continental Congress and/or held other government posts.

Arthur very much wanted Silas’ position. It would mean a more important role and a great opportunity for prospering financially. So he made it his mission in life to denigrate Silas at every opportunity, primarily in letters to the Continental Congress and to his various brothers, cousins, and brothers-in-law. Having a loose grip on the truth, Arthur tossed in outright lies whenever it suited his purpose.

By the way, it turns out that John Adams (yes, the John Adams we’ve been taught to idolize) became part of the Lee family cabal, so that it became referenced as the Lee-Adams cabal.

Communications between the colonies and Europe were slow slow slow. It took months for letters to cross the Atlantic and more months for responses to return from France and England. The Lee brothers lost no opportunity for sharing Arthur’s complaints about Silas with Congress as well as their social contacts, at home and in Philadelphia. These complaints first focused on Arthur’s (mistaken) notion that Silas Deane was enriching himself at the Colonies’ expense. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Then his complaints began to include assertions that Silas Deane was a traitor, that he was an English spy, that he was a Loyalist. These stories gained a lot of traction in the colonies, right up to and including George Washington, who went from admiring and respecting Silas to suspecting him of all the crimes Arthur accused him of.

It was interesting to me to note how mean and petty was the general character of the Continental Congress (this comes through clearly in the readings), and how impressed the people of Pennsylvania in general, and Philadelphia in particular, were with themselves, as opposed to other colonies...including Virginia, where the Lee family held court. One writer, Elizabeth Covart, said in her article on the website allthingsliberty.com, that Silas Deane stands in the shadows of early American history, victim of the jealousy and paranoia that pervaded Congress and took hold of other Patriot officials.

At one point, only a year or so into the Revolution, Congress recalled Silas. They gave him no reason for the recall, and he, suspecting nothing, left all his papers and account books behind in Paris. When Silas arrived in Philadelphia, Congress left him cooling his heels for the better part of two years, during which they never told him why they had recalled him and refused to allow him to come before them to hear from them what their issues were. Finally, in desperation, Silas left Philadelphia and returned to Paris to continue his work.

Silas’ original instructions had been that he should procure arms and other military materiel with the expectation that Congress would pay for such goods. Congress never paid a penny. In fact, Arthur Lee told Congress and everyone else he came in contact with that everything that came from France was in fact a gift from the French government. This was a blatant lie but conveniently, there was no one in the Colonies to say so. Silas spent years providing accounting to Congress and requesting payment to France and reimbursement to himself, to no avail. He was living on his own money, and not surprisingly, it wasn’t long before he was bankrupt.

Coincidentally, Silas and Benedict Arnold, both Connecticut boys, were well acquainted before the Revolution, and had been friends. Once Benedict Arnold became known as a traitor to his country, his name was anathema. Everyone who had known him became suspect. Because Silas had once been friendly with Arnold, the Lee-Adams cabal made much of the relationship as evidence that Silas was also a traitor.

Then he received warnings from close friends that it was dangerous for him to return to the Colonies, which by this time had defeated the British Army and now were engaged in attempting to establish a national government. There had been so much rumor spread that he was a traitor that he essentially became a man without a country. He was broke, and desperate, and sank into a huge depression. He wrote letters to everyone he knew, stating his case and complaining about the treatment he had received.

He moved to Ghent, in what is now Belgium, because it would be cheaper to live there. Eventually, he moved to London, at the behest of a fellow who had been his student back in Connecticut, and was now a respected doctor in London, Dr. Edward Bancroft. Of course, unknown to Silas and nearly everyone else, Bancroft was a double agent, and had been taking money from the English government for years. Bancroft cared for Silas, provided him living expenses, fed him, and nursed him through a long illness (most of two years), all without revealing that he was stealing Silas’ account books and correspondence.

During this time, Arnold was also in London, and came to see Silas. Silas politely asked him to leave and not return. But Arnold returned time and again, until Silas moved and left no forwarding address. Believe it or not, Arnold discovered his new lodgings and visited him there. Silas is said to have physically ejected Arnold from his rooms, and in front of witnesses, told him to leave and never return. To the best of our knowledge, Arnold finally got the point.

Finally, in 1799, when he was 51 years old, realizing that enough time had passed that emotions had subsided and that he was essentially forgotten back in the USA, he borrowed money for his passage home. Sadly, he barely made it onto the ship when he collapsed, lapsed into a coma, and died within a couple of hours. The ship returned to port and Silas Deane was buried in Deal, England, near Dover.

Most historians who have studied Silas Deane agree that he was murdered, probably poisoned, and very possibly by Dr. Edward Bancroft. But there is no agreement on why such a course would have been necessary. Others believe that he suffered a cerebral aneurysm.

Silas Deane died without having seen his family for nearly 20 years. In the meantime, his second wife had died; his stepchildren had gone their own ways (at least one of them accused Silas of cheating him of his inheritance); his health had deteriorated; his fortune had evaporated; his friends had abandoned him (on the basis of rumor and lies); and he went to his grave in poverty and disappointment.

Congress made no restitution for Deane or his family for another 50 years, when his granddaughter, Philura Alden, and her husband petitioned Congress once again. This time Congress elected to honor the petition and paid Philura $37,000, exactly the amount that Silas had claimed 50 years earlier. They did not acknowledge any wrongdoing in the process.

The USA owes Silas Deane a great debt. Without his unswerving efforts to win support from the French government, France would likely not have provided support to the fledgling country and it is entirely possible that we’d still be more or less loyal British subjects today. He was also responsible for recruiting several experienced European “soldiers of fortune” that were instrumental in the military successes the American army eventually achieved; these included Lafayette, Baron Johann de Kalb, Casimir Pulaski, and Baron von Steuben.

The historians whose books I read concur that Silas was a true patriot of the highest character. There was never any evidence of his personally benefitting from any of his assignments; quite to the contrary, in fact. He rose above the intrigue of our Continental Congress’s “politics” and self-serving behavior to give everything of himself to his country. He is one of Connecticut’s native sons most deserving of being remembered as a true hero of the Revolution.
We welcome new family members Bill & Debbie Pryor.

Captain Frank O’Beirne (Life Member) and Thomas Santos passed away.

The Mystic River Historic Society welcomes new members and membership renewals at any time.

Contact us at: info@mystichistory.org or 860-536-4779.

-- Cindy Allyn, Membership

Events Calendar

7pm Wednesday, March 27th, 2019
Outback, or Is This Necessary? with Virginia Williams
7pm refreshments & socializing, 7:30p program
Mystic Congregational Church Hall, Broadway & E. Main, Mystic
A sanctioned peek into outhouse history and lore.

7pm Tuesday, April 9th, 2018
History Book Club - MRHS & MNL Partnership
Activities Room, Mystic Noank Library
King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa, by Adam Hochschild
Read it? Interested? Always open to new reader members

7pm Wednesday, April 24th, 2019
The 1918 Influenza Epidemic with Dr. Ralph Arcari
The epidemic that claimed 8500 lives in Connecticut a century ago.
Bring a friend! All meetings are free and open to the public.
Donations welcome.

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