Views Across the River: Histories & Mysteries of the Peace Sanctuary & Coogan Farm

Flanking the east and west sides of the Mystic River lie two amazing properties rich in nature, history and culture. Come hear more from both sides of the river on Wednesday, March 28th when Maggie Jones, Executive Director Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center, will talk about the inhabitants, stories and significance of these lands past, present and future.

Executive Director at the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center since 1992 and a lifelong Mystic resident. As chief administrator of the Center she is responsible for the overall management of the organization, which serves more than 50,000 people and 1500 members each year. She has a degree in Botany from Connecticut College where she also studied Birds and Landscape Ecology. She has continued to pursue her interests in research and education projects, land preservation efforts, leading field trips, and as a member of the Connecticut Ornithological Association, Connecticut Botanical Society and local land trusts.

Stonewalls: History & Preservation of a New England Treasure

Dr. Robert Thorson, geologist, author and professor at the University of Connecticut, will give a presentation on Stonewalls: History and Preservation of a New England Treasure on Wednesday, April 25th, 2012. The story of our area’s stonewalls begins with the coastal landscapes being created by glaciers during the last Ice Age. The rise of farming by European settlers necessitated the removal of stones eventually leading to the building of stonewalls. Dr. Thorson will discuss stonewalls’ cultural geology and the efforts at preservation of these beautiful and iconic New England treasures.

By day, from September through May, Robert Thorson is a Professor of Geology at the rural Storrs campus of the University of Connecticut. There, he juggles teaching, research, advising, and committee work in the Honors Program, the Department of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology, the Department of Anthropology, and the Center for Integrated Geosciences. On weekends, he usually migrates toward the sea where he spends his time writing for the Hartford Courant and as a book author. His columns and essays follow the mantra “No rock. No ecosystem. No culture.” His books involve the link between geoscience and American Studies, the latest being a book on Thoreau’s Walden for Harvard University Press in 2013. With no academic obligations during the summer, he tends to go with the flow.
Readers of this column almost certainly have not devoted any thought to the fact that its subject matter is typically historically constrained. After all, the column appears in a newsletter of a society devoted to the preservation & illumination of the history of our little patch of Americana known as Mystic, CT. Naturally, the subject of its pages tends to focus almost singularly on matters related to the region’s past. But that past is, in the scheme of things, a relative, historical eye-blink.

It doesn’t take an enormous mental leap to jump from our apparent parochialism to a consideration of the deep and complex roots of our history going back centuries, indeed millennia. We neglect that consideration at our interpretive peril (regular readers will concede being reminded of George Santayana’s famous dictum). The lessons of history, while eternal, do not find their power dissipated because of a lack of relevance over time. They lose influence due to a failure of memory, or worse, interest. So, how better to contemplate the eternal lessons of history than by considering the Eternal City itself—Rome?

A recent review of books about Rome by Adam Kirsch in The New Yorker reminded me of the philosophical connection between our nation’s founding and our founders’ understanding of Roman history. As Kirsch succinctly puts it, our basic institutions, from the Senate to the Capitol, were explicitly modeled on those of the Roman republic, while the adoption debates regarding the Constitution were in part driven by the Roman example as one to be alternately emulated and shunned.

As much as Roman history fascinates me, my purpose here is not to reflect on it per se. Instead, my interest is in Kirsch’s review itself and his critique of the numerous books covered by the review. Kirsch’s piece provides evidence of both exemplary and fuzzy thinking - reminding us of the need to think critically about not only the events of the past and what the participants said, but also historians’ perceptions and analysis.

Kirsch rightly praises those authors who offer truly original research and thoughtful reinterpretations. For instance, a new biography of Caligula refreshingly suggests that Caligula, traditionally viewed as “gone crackers”, might not have been off his rocker at all. Instead, the author posits, he was just reacting to the withering opposition of the old aristocracy (the anecdote about making his horse a senator being evidence of political theater rather than any madness). This serves as a reminder of the danger of relying too heavily on sparse surviving contemporary sources, especially when they may have represented overt attempts to influence the views of others. Think about it this way—if the only surviving sources regarding American history for the last 20 years were the fulminations of Ann Coulter and Rush Limbaugh, how might future generations be inclined to view Bill Clinton and Barack Obama? Perhaps Caligula’s reputation suffers from just such a circumstance.

On the other hand, a healthy skepticism doesn’t mean that all contemporary sources had a bone to pick and are unreliable. Yet Kirsch writes uncritically of one historian whose skepticism appears completely untethered. Take, for instance, the “accepted” story of Cincinnatus, who assumed dictatorial powers over the early Roman republic, saved Rome and then, inexplicably to this historian, proceeded to give up those powers and return to his farm. Is it possible the story was trumped up because Romans wanted to believe in an unselfish, noble past? Sure. But is it really so unbelievable? Perhaps Kirsch and this historian need reminding of George Washington, who returned to his farm not just once after saving his country, but twice (the skeptics among us notwithstanding)! Cont. on p. 3
But my real disappointment with Kirsch’s review centers on his willingness to accept a view of Rome which, while certainly appealing to those who see only unfairness and brutality in life, doesn’t square with what intuition and common sense insist must be. The last of the authors he reviewed, who focused on Rome’s architectural and cultural history, appears to have a world view that appeals to Kirsch—one in which the wealthy are, as a group, routinely dissolute and irresponsible, while life for everybody else is brutish and short. He refers to the author’s description of the “glorious” Christian reconstruction of Rome during the Renaissance, but his examples (including the denuding of Roman architectural treasures) should cause us to think instead of more recent cultural atrocities like the Taliban’s destruction of ancient Buddhist statuary. And lest we forget what followed the Roman Empire in terms of sheer human brutality right up to our own “enlightened” day, can an empire that virtually eliminated war and destruction within its interior provinces for a period of some 300 years deserve a blanket dismissal as completely unworthy? Regardless of the Empire’s obvious vices and flaws, intuition and common sense argue for a more nuanced view.

Santayana did warn us about the dangers of forgetting the past. But the dangers of forgetting may not be significantly different than the dangers of partisan misinterpretation. And that’s the real lesson here—to be skeptical of even the skeptics!

Dear Newsletter Reader,

We are encouraging our readers to shift from receiving the Portersville Press, our printed newsletter to reading it as an electronic e-newsletter. This change will enable us to publish in color, cut down on the time required to get new issues to you, and save approximately $800 per year in printing and postage costs. However, if you wish to continue with the traditional printed issues, they will be mailed to you as always.

Please let us know your preference by checking the appropriate boxes below & returning this page to: MRHS, PO Box 245, Mystic, CT 06355

Alternatively, you may email your selections & information to: lallyn@snet.net Please include your name and “MRHS Reader’s Choice” in the subject.

Also, we have decided to make the minutes of the meetings of the Board of Directors available separately instead of being included in the newsletters. Please let us know your preference by checking the appropriate box below.

Both the newsletter and the Board minutes will continue to be available online at www.mystichistory.org

Thank you - your participation and feedback is important!

Sincerely yours,
Louis Allyn, President

Name

☐ Please email my newsletter to (email address)

OR

☐ Please continue to postal mail me a printed copy of the newsletter (which will still be in black & white)

- AND -

☐ Please email the Board of Directors meeting minutes to (email address)

OR

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Address: Street, City, State, Zipcode

Continued from p. 2

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From Our Readership: Historic Vignettes

Iron Family of Mystic from Robert Irons

Since my family is the last of this Irons line I thought it was appropriate to find a few words and stories to document some of what I know about this branch of the Irons family that settled in the Mystic area. Part One described the Col. Laben Irons Family line originating with Matthew (1615-61) of Boston to Lydia of Stonington, CT. The second part told of Laben & Lydia’s son, Dexter (1807-58) who was the first to move to the Mystic area and became a Merchant Ship Builder and partner in the Irons & Grinnell shipyard.

Resolved Irons, the author’s great grandfather, appears to have moved to the Mystic area not too long after his brother Dexter. According to Stonington records, Resolved worked with his brother as a ship’s carpenter, and, according to Mystic Seaport’s former curator, William Peterson, made a capstan for a clipper ship.

Resolved likely lived on the west side of Old Mystic, as Groton records document the birth of his first child. He later moved to an 1853-built house in Mystic Bridge, now known as 40 Denison Ave/Rte 27, Mystic. He married Martha B. Walden (1808-1886) of Burrilville, RI and they had seven children; some of whom were born in Rhode Island, where Martha must have moved back for a time: James (1828-47), Lydia A. (1838-68), Reuben A. (1836-90), Martha M. (1841), Alexander (1847-1907), Henrietta (1850-1914), and Philip Austin (1845-1910), the author’s grandfather.

Reuben’s local activities included “join(ing) with members of Oriental Baseball Club of Mystic” according to the Mystic Pioneer news 3 March 1866, and that he was Vice President of the Grant Campaign Fund in 1868, and a charter member of Relief Lodge No. 17 (Lodge of Masons) Mystic - charter granted May, 1870. He was part owner of a country store “...Grinnell & Irons at the old stand where may be found a choice selection of Fine Groceries, Flour, Apples, and a large assortment of Boots and Shoes of all descriptions...”

Philip married Mary Jane Burrows in 1866 in Stonington and soon moved to Mystic River (Groton) where they had three children in Evelina Etta (1867-1951), Nellie Maude (1873-74) and Herbert Philip, the author’s father, (1880-1963). They moved to Worcester, MA for a while to follow opportunities for Philip’s machinist trade, then later to 5 Ashby street where he passed away at home 7 February, 1910, according to a local paper: “After an illness of only a few days duration, Philip A. Irons, one of the village’s well known and most highly respected residents passed away...early last evening, from peritonitis.” The obituary also cites Philip’s machinist skills, his enlistment in the Twentysixth Regiment, Connecticut Volunteers, membership of Williams Post, G.A.R., Charity & Relief Lodge, A.F.&A.M. of which he was past master, and Mistuxet Lodge, Knights of Phythias. “Being possessed of a quiet disposition a wide circle of friends who will be pained to learn of his sudden demise.”

Spring Into Rhode Island This May...

...with the MRHS Bus Trip on Wednesday, May 2nd, 2012

7:30 am - Leave Olde Mistick Village • 7:45 am - Leave StoneRidge • 6:00 pm - Return

Enjoy the morning at the Blithewold Mansion and Gardens in Bristol, RI - where the daffodils, dogwoods and azaleas should be in bloom. Blithewold was named one of the top 5 public gardens in New England by Yankee Magazine in 2010. Luncheon will follow.

In the afternoon we’ll explore the historic John Brown House Museum in Providence - home to the Rhode Island Historical Society. “One of America’s grandest mansions” when it was built in 1788, the Brown House is a painstakingly restored national landmark which features lighter and darker aspects of history from 18th & 19th century artwork & furniture to a slave trade exhibit.

$125.00 Per person includes bus, snacks, all admissions and lunch. Please send a check made out to MRHS to MRHS, PO Box 245, Mystic, CT 06355.

Call Sally Halsey at 860.271.3980 for more information and registration.

Right: The John Brown House Museum

Background: Daffodils & stone bench of Blithewold.
In honor of the Civil War sesquicentennial, I will be looking at the war month-by-month from the historic local point of view: Like the citizens of Mystic at the time, we have no idea how long the war will go, what the incredible cost will be, or even who will prevail in the end. It should be interesting to watch it ‘unfold’ in the months to come....

As March begins, many Mystic residents are cleaning up from a strong late-winter storm. The record low tides stranded many boats, and the high winds blew down barns and toppled chimneys all along the river. The engine house roof at Cottrell’s shop in Mystic Bridge was one of the storm’s casualties.

Noank smacks and schooners begin to depart in twos and threes for Nantucket shoals, heralding the start of the spring fishing season. Local support is strong for incumbent governor William Buckingham’s “Union Ticket,” comprised of both Democrats and Republicans who have pledged to put aside their party affiliations for the duration of the war. The deadline for renting “slips” in the Congregational Church is approaching.

But politics, the weather, and even fishing cannot upstage the war. The Mallory yard launches two more vessels for government service. Casualty lists from Burnside’s spring offensive on the Outer Banks report that the local company of the CT 10th lost 21 killed and wounded in the fighting on Roanoke Island. In a misguided attempt to reassure their families, the paper describes the injuries of the wounded in great detail, information that surely brought more alarm than comfort to many families.

The war shifts Mystic’s traditional global focus. Mystic vessels continue to arrive from the Cape of Good Hope, California, England, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, bringing newspapers from distant ports that are made available for perusal at the Pioneer offices. But often the news from foreign ports of call is eclipsed by the letters from Mystic soldiers and sailors in less exotic places. One member of Captain Fish’s cavalry company attempts to describe for the folks back home the dense cloud of coal dust and smoke that hangs suspended in the air over Wheeling, Virginia. At sea, a sailor on the USS Colorado reports on the excitement of chasing blockade runners at the mouth of the Mississippi; Captain Appleman of the smack Pacific relates some of the hazards of carrying freight to Key West for the U.S. Army; a crewmember on the Mallory’s yacht Zouave, that had been donated to the government early in the war, wrote from Virginia about the “great naval battle” the crew witnessed in Hampton Roads. Through their letters “the Mystic boys” in the army, navy, and merchant service are able to stay connected with their home community.

The war, which many Northerners thought would scarcely last a few months, now enters its second year. The victory of Governor Buckingham’s Union Ticket in the state elections ensures that Connecticut will continue to support the Federal war effort.

At the beginning of April, the Pioneer publishes another letter from the Zouave in Virginia, with eyewitness details of the naval battle of Hampton Roads at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. “H.K.C.,” a member of the Zouave’s crew, describes their first sighting of the ironclad Monitor arriving on the scene on the morning of March 9th to engage the Confederate ironclad Virginia. “[S]oon, in the far distance, something was seen streaming along; it had much the appearance of a large washtub; everyone wondered at its boldness, for it made for the rebels under full steam.” A long letter from Captain Fish’s cavalry reveals they have left “smokey” Wheeling and are now at Winchester, in the Shenandoah Valley. “E.R.” reports that the 1st CT artillery is also on the move. They left Fort Richardson on board the steamers Knickerbocker and Mystic and are steaming down the Potomac River, destination unknown.

Local soldiers are not the only correspondents whose letters appear in the Pioneer. A rather macabre practice involves taking letters from the uniform pockets of fallen enemy soldiers and sending them home as souvenirs. Occasionally these letters also find their way into the local paper, revealing that soldiers on both sides often shared the same fears, hopes, and longing for their homes & loved ones.

On the home front, the community is encouraged to support a new enterprise – a gun manufactory to produce a breech-loading rifle patented by two local men. A campaign to solicit donations for a Liberty Pole is announced. Charles Mallory donates a lower mast for the base of the pole, and Thomas Williams and Lyman Dudley agree to supply a spot near Steamboat Wharf on the Mystic River side of the bridge. The committee optimistically proposes “to have all ready for the stars and stripes to float gracefully from the top of that pole at the soon-coming welcome news of the next great national victory.”

The Liberty Pole, ca. 1924, sits at East Main and Holmes in front of the “Hotel Mystic” and “Chesebro Inc. Real Estate.” Today, a temporary placeholder pole stands in this original location until the return of the refurbished flagpole.
You just never know what you might find at the Downes Building. Yesterday I came across “The Mystic Merchants’ Messenger”, a give-away publication from 1948 published by the Merchants’ Division of the Chamber of Commerce “for the purpose of promoting a ‘shop at home first’ program. (So I guess the recent “Shop Locally” movement has some historic roots.) The event was “Mystic Open House Days” and coupons for free admission to the Seaport, the Mystic Art Association, the Denison Homestead and the Pequot-Sepos Wildlife Sanctuary were included.

Of those listed as members of the 1948 merchant group, several are still around in some form: Broadway Sunoco, SNET, Puritan Laundry, Maxwelton Co and Grossman’s Fish Market. Several more were still in business until fairly recently: A&P, Bendett’s, Cottrell’s Lumber, Mystic Ice Company, Mystic Pharmacy and Mystic Sporting Goods.

The advertised prices listed certainly illustrate the forces of inflation over the last 60 years. Granted these were “specials” for a limited time, but still... a Martini? 35 cents at the Hotel Mystic Taproom. A bottle of catsup? 23 cents at Calkins store. A one-gallon thermos jug? $1.80 at Western Auto. A full course steak dinner? $1.50 at Fazzina’s Restaurant. And of course the changes downtown are not just in the prices! 56 West Main sold coal and hardware, now, of course, they sell pizza. 15 West Main was the home of Western Auto. Now it’s Fripperies fancy undies.

Judy Hicks and Betty Ann Tylaska have been heading up a research project on the history of the downtown buildings and businesses. The information in this old paper certainly relates to that, although they are going further back into time than 1948. More details on this project in the months to come before MRHS celebrates our 40th Anniversary in 2013.

In 1891, Conrad Kretzer started a self-named newspaper & variety store (upper right) which became a staple in downtown Mystic. The business was taken over by Lucy Kretzer in 1909 and sold in 1949. In classic New England style, many locals will still today refer to the northwest corner of West Main and Pearl as “where Kretzer’s used to be” — although the location has since housed a number of different businesses and has been Bartleby’s Café since 1999.

Above left: A Kretzer’s advertisement matchbook - an anachronism in its own right in today’s non-smoking world.

The Education Outreach program at Portersville Academy will be happening during the month of May and the first two weeks in June. History students from Fitch High School have donated their time and effort in making the journals that the first and third graders will use in their craft projects as part of the program. Also, volunteers from the Mystic Woman’s Club have volunteered for the “downstairs” fun and craft activities. Kay Janney (first grade) and Tim Evers (third grade) have generously agreed to continue as teachers in the reenactment of what it was like going to class during the 1800’s in Mystic.

Of course, we could always use more volunteers! The exact dates are yet to be determined. The hours needed are from 9:30-11:30 am Monday through Friday. Please let me know if you would be available on one or more days. Contact Cathy Mauritz at 860-333-4876 or cemauritz@yahoo.com if you can help out.

A duncecap looms threatenly in the foreground as volunteer Tim Edwards instructs a fieldtrip student at Portersville Academy. Both First and Third grade lessons in “Readin’, ‘Ritin’ and ‘Rithmetic” are conducted as they were in 1845, including proper school manners and behavior. Lessons are followed by learning about “Families at Sea” for first graders, and “Home Life in the 19th Century” for third graders, complete with period toys, costumes & a craft project.
After World War I, the Federal Government passed the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1921. The roads in the US were to be improved. It was the roaring 20’s and the automobile manufacturing and use were taking off. Here in Mystic those autos had a hard time making it up Baptist Hill (but the horses and drivers liked racing down!) The Government also wanted to establish a consistent system of highways. Individual states had their own numbered roads, identified by varieties of signs and colors. Now US Routes were to be established. The “New England Route 1”, also known as the “Post Road” in Connecticut became US Route 1 in 1923. It could have been the first numbered highway in Connecticut, as most roads had names or houses as identities. In addition to improving the road itself, the government wanted to streamline these routes. And here in Mystic that was to be a major job.

A Groton town meeting was held early in March 1923 to discuss the offers by the state to build a “trunk line” over Baptist Hill. The cost to the town would be $25,000. Civil engineers had also designed US1 to follow the Providence Road, Route 184. This plan would by pass Groton’s, Mystic’s and Stonington’s commercial areas. But many Mystic people were adamantly against the project and circulars were handed around town proclaiming how such a road would spoil their pretty little village. A bus was provided for Mystic people to attend the meeting but very few other Groton Townsmen were present. The proposal for the road to go through Mystic was handily voted down. Clark Whaley, First Selectman in Groton said “Mystic cut its own throat in squelching the proposition that the state offered.” And in a few days, most Mystic objectors felt that he was right. A petition was circulated to call a second meeting on the subject. The needed number of signatures was readily obtained, but one resident, Dr Allyn, did not agree. He went into the drugstore and tore a petition into 4 pieces. The petition was just reassembled and all the pieces taken to the town to prove that they indeed had the required number of signatures. Dr. Allyn was Lou Allyn’s (the current president of MRHS) grandfather. Lou said that he was not surprised by his grandfather’s actions.

Prior to 1923, Main Street ended at the top of the hill in front of Union Baptist Church. In order to reach Route 1, you’d take a left at the top of the hill, then a right and be on the Old New London Road that connected to what we know now as Route 1. Another way to avoid the “big” hill was to go south on Water St, take a right in front of the Emporium and go up the less steep Dudley Hill The state’s solution was to blast the Baptist Hill and lower the grade of the hill from 13% to 9%, and build a new road west to connect with Route 1. In order to do this one house had to be taken down and two moved. Since the New London Evening Day didn’t report any uproar or objections, the owners must have been satisfied. McCann Brothers of New Haven had the contract and started in July and the road was closed off in August.

The house at the bottom of the hill was purchased by a man on the job. It was demolished and he moved the materials to Old Mystic. The McDonald house at the top of the hill was jacked up on timbers to be moved back in order to straighten out the road. The barn on Library St owned by John B. Gray was also readied to be moved. Sawhorses blocked all traffic. Now Water St. and the Dudley Hill were the only way to Route 1.

Work proceeded through the rest of the year and the road was opened in August 1924. The blasted cliff rocks were used to raise the level of the road at Bank Square and for repairs on Water St. On August 2, 1924, the New London Evening News reported that the concrete pavement over Baptist Hill had been completed and “as soon as it hardens, about a week, the road will be opened. Water Street will then be closed and 1200 feet of concrete will be laid.” The newspaper predicted it would all be done in several weeks.

Current Mystic residents can relate to all this work, but it is interesting that the work on Baptist Hill started in August and one year to the month, it was completed. Different times, different ways.
Missing Meeting Minutes?  The MRHS Board Meeting Minutes have now been moved to online publishing for your convenience!  They will be fresh off the press as soon as the minutes have been approved at www.mystichistory.org.  See inside page 3 for special requests.

Membership Updates

Last month we had three renewals--M/M Kevin North at the Contributing level, M/M John Washburn at the Benefactor level and Donna Ryan at the Sustainer level.  We also had two new Individual memberships -- Lisa Saunders and Susan Wyatt.

We mailed out our 2012 membership renewal letters including an e-newsletter questionnaire in mid February.  
If you did not get one please let us know.

- Cynthia Allyn, Membership Chair

Mystic, Ct 06355
P.O. Box 245
Tuesdays 9 A.M. - 12 NOON
Wednesdays 1 P.M. - 4 P.M.
Thursdays 1 P.M. - 4 P.M.

Published Six Times
Vol. XXVIII, Issue V • March-April 2012
Published by Connecticut Press
Non-profit Organization