On May 23rd, Jim Streeter, Groton’s Town Historian, will speak about Morton F. Plant: The Man, The Myth, The Legend. An almost larger-than-life character, Morton Plant’s life (1852-1918) reads like a novel. Born to a father who grew wealthy with the “opening up of Florida,” Plant was an industrialist, running steamship and railroad companies, owning hotels and buying and selling real estate in New York City and Florida.

Also quite generous with the money he earned, Plant gave a large endowment to ensure the success of New London’s Connecticut College for Women in 1911 for which he was chairman of the founding board. His summer cottage, the 31-room Branford House at Groton’s Eastern Point Beach, is now the 70 acre property of the University of Connecticut’s Avery Point campus.

A well-known sportsman, Morton Plant was involved in many aspects of yachting, from design to racing, and he even owned a baseball team in New London. In his private life, scandal arose from Plant’s 1914 courtship and marriage to his second wife, Mae Caldwell Manwaring, a recent divorcée 30 years his junior.

Author Jim Streeter is a Groton native, a Town’s Historian, a Town Councilor and past Mayor of the Town of Groton, and also an active founder of Groton Historical Society. A Graduate of the University of New Haven’s Criminal Justice & Industrial Relations programs, Streeter is a former police officer and retired Forensic Evidence Examiner for the Connecticut State Police. He has spent 34 years appointed or elected in public service.

Please join MRHS on Wednesday, May 23rd at 7:30pm at Mystic Congregational Church Hall to hear more of the fascinating life of Morton F. Plant.
A recent monograph reminded me of the dangers of bias confirmation - the undisciplined practice of reading only those authors who consistently support one’s world view - a practice unfortunately common among otherwise intelligent people. How often do we go out of our way to hunt for commentators with whom we disagree? Most of us do not, as the expected consequence is an unwelcome rise in blood pressure rather than composed contemplation of the logic of the “other side” and contrary opinion. However, that’s the whole point, isn’t it?

Ok, time to concede that the referenced monograph did not involve a direct refutation of any of my own, significant, philosophical biases (of which there are too many to list here), but rather provided a gentle reproof that two of my milder prejudices should be reconsidered. To alleviate any reader concern that I’ve gone “off the farm” for a history column, the necessary historical context does exist and is based on two reconsiderations: first, the appropriateness of officially designating a discrete time of the year to study specific history and, second, where we should go to “find” history.

Let’s start with that first pet peeve - “official” times of the year to consider specific history - in this case, the month of February, “Black History Month”. The designation has always seemed artificial and unnecessary to me, detracting from the serious study of black history during the other 11 months. Why on earth would it be a good idea to consign that consideration to just one month? But, a superb article about a boxing match in England 200 years ago caused me to reconsider. If openly declaiming the inappropriateness of something, we should be prepared to back it up. I realized I could not make the requisite demonstration: although critical of Black History Month, I’ve done embarrassingly little to further my own knowledge of black history.

So, the Brian Phillips boxing article resulted in epiphany. Entitled, “A Fighter Abroad” and published on the web at www.grantland.com on January 26, 2012, it details the career of Tom Molineaux, remembered as a freed American slave, who crossed the Atlantic to England in 1809 with a single-minded goal—to challenge the greatest fighter of the time, the English boxing “champion”, Tom Cribb. The story itself is entirely remarkable and I recommend it to all as a brilliant, absorbing, well-written and oddly familiar historical tale of courage, racism, and the very beginnings of modern spectator sports and sports journalism. However, my concern is with the previously noted mea culpa regarding my now-corrected prejudice: I realized that but for February’s designation, Phillips piece might not have seen the light of a published day and I would have been, perhaps forever, ignorant of an extraordinary story.

And that leads to the correction of the second prejudice. The website which published Phillips work, Grantland.com, is owned by ESPN and dedicated to commentary on the current sports scene. Who would have thought that a creditable and entirely entertaining work of history would be created by a staff writer for a sports magazine? I know better now.

So, there you have it. I would guess the kind of biases described here are not unique to me. While they are hardly the stuff of moral bankruptcy, they do interfere with proper reflection and scholarship. The lesson is simple enough. We fail to challenge our biases and prejudices at our intellectual and scholarly peril. So, challenge yourself daily. And you can start by reading Phillips article!
Portersville Academy Project Volunteers Wanted  - Cathy Mauritz

The dates for classes visiting Portersville Academy are May 7, 8, 16, 17, and 21st. Times needed for volunteers are 9:30-11:30am on those dates to assist with student craft projects, etc. If you can help, please contact Cathy Mauritz at 860-333-4876 or cemauritz@yahoo.com

Our Downtown Merchants Need Your Help  - Lou Allyn

As a local resident you are undoubtedly aware of the seemingly endless work in downtown Mystic on the bridge and the Streetscape project. You may also have seen a recent article in the Groton Patch: A Tough Combination For Mystic: The Recession, Streetscape and Bridge Repair with a lead paragraph “Downtown Mystic business owners said the combination of the recession, streetscape project and Mystic bridge repair has been hard on them, and Groton’s economic development specialist said they need local customers to help them get through this time.”

At a roundtable luncheon the other day Tricia Cunningham, President, Greater Mystic Chamber of Commerce, talked about the sense of helplessness and frustration of the business owners as they struggle to survive. She said “While the Mystic Streetscape project is just a few months away from completion, it has been tough on each of our businesses in downtown Mystic throughout the project. Now more than ever, the business in our unique downtown needs the support of our local community. The project is slated to be near completion on June 30 and we are asking every individual who reads this to commit to taking a trip into Downtown in the month of May and support the stores, restaurants, coffee shops etc and help give these businesses a boost. This gesture of supporting local business will surely make a difference. Thank you for your support!”

Many of the downtown businesses have supported the Mystic River Historical Society over the years and we would like to do something to support them by publicizing their need for your support and providing free advertising in our newsletter, the Portersville Press, for the rest of 2012.

Please do your part. Go to town, stop in some stores and buy something - even a gift certificate will help. Go to www.mysticchamber.org or www.mystictoday.com and browse the stores in Mystic to remind yourself who is there. Free parking is available in the lot behind the 4th District Voting Hall at 10 Broadway Avenue just north of Church Street. On a spring day two blocks to the bridge is a fine walk.

~ Thank you. ~

SHOP MYSTIC

PARK & WALK
MEET UP WITH A FRIEND

SPEND & STAY IN MYSTIC

KEEP YOUR DOLLARS IN TOWN AND SUPPORT OUR LOCAL ECONOMY

FIND A FULL LIST OF MERCHANTS & SERVICES AT

WWW.MYSTICTODAY.COM OR WWW.MYSTICCHAMBER.ORG
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,” writes Robert.

Part One described the Col. Laben Irons Family line originating with Matthew (1615-61) of Boston to Lydia of Stonington, CT. Part Two 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. Part Three related the life of Dexter’s brother, Resolved Irons, and his son Philip Austin (1845-1910), the author’s grandfather.

Herbert Philip, the author’s father, was one of three children, including Nellie Maude (1873-1874) and Evelina Etta (1867-1951) born to Philip and Mary Jane Irons. Herbert was born on the Groton side of Mystic on August 2, 1880, and the family later moved to a new house on Bank Street about two years later. Herbert graduated from the Mystic Valley English and Classical Institute, then, like his father, learned the machinist trade and moved to Worcester, MA in 1898 to work at Woodward & Powell Planer Co. where he broke his nose and lost part of his left, little finger.

The family eventually returned to Mystic to live at 5 Ashby Street, and Herbert worked for New London Ship & Engine Co., in Groton and the West Hartford Division of Pratt & Whitney from which he retired.

Herbert was active locally as a member of Charity & Relief Lodge A.M. & F.M. No. 72 Masonic Lodge of Mystic, Royal Arch Masons, Tall Cedars of Lebanon, Masonic Veterans Association of Connecticut and the Union Baptist Church in Mystic.

Herbert was married to Mabel L. Story for a short period and they had a daughter, Dorothy Elizabeth, born 1 December 1910. Dorothy married twice with neither marriage resulting in children.

In May of 1917, Herbert married May Elizabeth Little of New London, CT. The couple’s daughter, Doris Eleanor, was born in February of 1919 while they lived at 110 Hempstead St, New London. In October of the same year, the family moved to 28 Stanton Lane in Mystic where the author, Robert Philip Irons was born on January 21, 1932.

Doris married Charles Edgar Calkins in September, 1941 and they had two children, Robert Earl (1944-1957) and George Philip (b. 1947). Doris Eleanor, Herbert Philip, Nellie Maude, Philip Austen, Mary Ann & Dexter and their children and Resolved Irons and two of his children are all interred at Elm Grove Cemetery in Mystic.

Robert Irons married Lillian May Boiselle in June 1953, and had one daughter, Denise Anne (b. December 7, 1960.) As of March 22, 2011, Robert was living with his wife at 28 Stanton Lane in Mystic, in the family’s house in which he was born.

Lucy Howell has become a regular contributor with several commentaries submitted to this paper over the past two volumes. In the most recent hand-written note, she responded to segments from the March-April Issue.

In the ca. 1924 photo of the flagpole, Ms. Howell notes: “The house on the northeast corner held the home of Dr. Meyer - a good old-fashioned doctor, (who) I believe was run over crossing East Main - probably (not long) after this picture was taken.

Also, she writes fondly of Kretzer’s: “I loved Kretzer’s store! In the 1920’s The Day (newspaper) could be purchased there for three cents! And penny candy! The best!”

Ms. Howell mentioned in her note that she knew the Irons family of Stanton Lane, Mystic - including Bob and his sister Doris. See Irons story below.

Although it is not the home mentioned in this article, the 1850 House on Denison Avenue in Mystic was built by Robert Irons’ great grandfather, a carpenter and shipbuilder. The house is on the National Register of Historic Places and is available for vacation rental stays.
The Historical Committee of the Mystic Valley Civic Association from Rosemary Dayton

The following was sent to us in 2009 by Rosemary Dayton in Williamsport, PA. She notes that "The enclosed copy of the Compass Newspaper tells the story of the original beginning of the saving and restoration of the (Portersville) Academy in 1966." There is also a photo of the Academy taken in 1960 through her living room window at 10 New London Rd.

Rosemary's attached note says "Kathy and I found the original oval window in the attic of the building. Jerry Hoxie repaired it and showed us how to set up the shutters so they were easier to scrape and paint. It all was a labor of love as none of us wanted to see the building demolished."

The amazing part of this little bit of local history is that this is the first document I have seen regarding the Committee, the precursor to the Mystic River Historical Society, which was established in 1973.

Several things to note in the photo: 1. The center door and flanking windows which were later replaced with two doors, 2. The oval window which was recently repainted by Rod Greene, and 3. The volunteers painting high up on a narrow scaffold. And in the article the start of our partnership with the Mystic Women's Garden Club.

- By Lou Allyn

Sea Scouts from Roland Pampel

One of the pleasures of sending out emails to the MRHS members is the variety of responses that come back. The following is from Roland Pampel in response to my April Fools email, which, by the way, raised a lot of smiles and some "whaaats?"

I wanted to share my thoughts when I saw your email on the relocation of the Portersville Academy. When I was a boy I lived on Latham Street, just up the hill from the Academy building. Between the age of 8 - 12 years old, I used to attend frequent Sea Scouts' meetings that were run by a Cmdr. White who lived on High Street for many years. He taught us: Rules of the Road, knot tying, handling of rifles, and many other things. He taught us how to march and we participated in many of the holiday parades in the area wearing our uniforms and white spats. At the end of the meetings, we used to have boxing matches and he taught us how to box. Cmdr. White was a great guy and taught us a lot. The meetings were held in a large room on the second floor. So, your picture of the academy brought a rush of warm feelings to me. Thanks. - Roland

And my answer to Roland, who graduated from the Mystic Academy in 1948: ...I lived up on Library Street and was a Sea Scout also. I remember marching in a Memorial Day parade with a rifle on my shoulder, roasting in my wool uniform (with the spats). This was in my 2nd or 3rd grade, before we moved to Masons Island in 1948. Was there a compass rose on the floor? We used to pace around all the points and call them out - north by north northeast, north northeast, and so on. (Or maybe it was the second floor of the Odd Fellows Hall in Cottrell Street when I was in Boy Scouts Troop 34?)

So, Dear Reader, as they say, if anyone has a remembrance of the Mystic Sea Scouts, or Troop 34, please send them to me. Lallyn@snet.net

- By Lou Allyn
Saturday afternoon, May 17, 1862, is a day to be remembered in Mystic," the Pioneer proclaims. "Our new Liberty Pole was finished and ready to receive the flag of the Union." The ceremony draws more than a thousand spectators to Steamboat Wharf. The cornet band plays from the porch of Prentice's store, the flag is raised by Captain Jeremiah Holmes, "the hero of the battle of Stonington," Mr. Silas B. Ramsdell offers the oration, and a thirteen gun salute brings the festivities to an end. (Despite the public support, the committee of arrangements publicly apologized to the citizens of Greenmanville for scheduling the ceremony for a Saturday, the Seventh Day Baptist Sabbath, admitting it could have been delayed until Monday, "had it been thought of before handbills were sent out.") The Liberty Pole is truly a community project. The cost is shared by more than 180 local citizens; some, like Charles Mallory and William Batty, donate materials or labor, while cash donations range from $30 to 25 cents. Messrs. Williams and Dudley donate the land near the wharf for a nominal rent of 5 cents per year "so long as the pole is kept in repair." The Liberty Pole gives the community a much-needed gathering place to exhibit their patriotism and celebrate "the successes of our army and navy in support of the government of the United States," successes everyone hopes would be soon forthcoming.

The river is filled with ships. Schooners arrive almost weekly from Philadelphia carrying ship plank, from New Brunswick with spars, and from Maine with lumber, all to supply the local shipyards. Many of the yards are working to capacity; the foundries, ropewalks, riggers, caulkers, sailmakers and chandlers share in the rush of activity. The booming shipbuilding economy draws workers from around the region; many homeowners take advantage of the opportunity to earn additional income by taking in boarders.

Other facets of the economy are flourishing as well. Noank smacks report catching nearly sixty thousand codfish in April alone. The government extends its contract for carbines with the Joslyn firearms company in the Borough for an additional year. Even the occasional bad news from the war, such as the sinking of the Mallory-built gunboat Varuna off New Orleans, or infrequent casualties among local soldiers, does not lessen the war's positive impact.

In the first year of the war, restoring the Union was the government's official goal. But one year into the conflict, the issue of emancipations enters the public discourse. Early in May, the Pioneer leads with a long and powerful editorial tying the restoration of the Union with the restoration of "the original sentiments of the founders of our Republic...on the subject of involuntary servitude." The paper points out that this broadening of the war aims is not simply espoused at the upper levels of government, but "is most powerfully at work among the millions of reading, thinking, and qualified voters of our great country." The editor closes with an appeal to all his readers, Democrats and Republicans, to "speak and act from the convictions of duty and right...mainly and decidedly in favor of emancipation."
“The absorbing news from the seat of war now overshadows all other subjects,” the Mystic Pioneer reported in late May. The Pioneer is now printing more than one thousand copies a week, but with war news arriving by telegraph several times each day, a weekly paper cannot satisfy the public demand. Local citizens begin to rely on the New London Daily Chronicle, which arrives in town on the early morning train, for the most recent updates from the battlefields.

Keeping up with “the absorbing news” is especially challenging because local men are now fighting on several fronts, from Virginia to Louisiana. Mystic “boys” in the 1st Heavy Artillery are moving through Virginia with McClellan’s long-awaited Peninsula Campaign, hoping to capture Richmond and strike a fatal blow at the Confederacy. Also in Virginia, Captain Fish’s Company of the 1st Cavalry, along with the 5th Infantry, are assigned to General Banks’ forces in the Shenandoah Valley, pursuing, and often pursued by, Stonewall Jackson. The 5th was hard hit at Winchester in late May, retreating all the way back to Maryland. The next week, their confidence renewed, they marched back into Virginia with orders to pin down the elusive Jackson. As the constantly shifting lines of battle laid waste to this beautiful area, one of Capt. Fish’s men wrote “May my own state ever to be delivered from being the battleground of two opposing armies.”

Mystic soldiers are also in action with General Butler’s army in Louisiana. The 12th Infantry had spent the previous winter housed at Camp Lyon, near Farmington Avenue in West Hartford, sleeping in Sibley tents in the snow. Now they are encamped at an abandoned Confederate earthworks about ten miles north of New Orleans they call Camp Parapet. The 13th Infantry is headquartered at the New Orleans Customs House, assigned to provost duty in the city.

The largest number of local soldiers are assigned to General Burnside’s forces on the North Carolina Outer Banks. The 8th, 10th, and 11th Regiments had spent most of January and February on board crowded troop ships in the stormy Atlantic with inadequate provisions. Some men from the 11th were shipwrecked on Cape Hatteras when the bark Voltiguer washed ashore in a gale. All three regiments had been involved in the fighting on Roanoke Island, Bogues Bank, and New Bern. The 8th played a key role in the surrender of Fort Macon in late April, an event that produced the town’s first real war hero when Captain Hiram Appleman of Groton, in temporary command of the regiment, was wounded by a Confederate canister round during the siege. The 11th held the center of the Union line in the Battle of New Bern; their colors were among the first raised over the captured Confederate town. Now with the Outer Banks under Union control, all three regiments are encamped in New Bern and along the Trent River, performing patrol duty and awaiting further orders.

The excitement and uncertainty of the news from the battlefields contrasts with the seasonal routines of local life, such as Strawberry Festivals at the local churches and the return of the schooner Cornelia from Hurd’s Island with 1200 bbl. of elephant seal oil. As June draws to a close, planning for a “Grand Celebration” of the 4th of July is in full swing. The citizens of Mystic are determined to demonstrate their Union spirit and support for their “boys” on duty far from home.
Membership Meeting
Wed., May 23, 2012, 7:30p
Mystic Congregational Church Hall
at Broadway and E. Main St., Mystic
Jim Streeter: Groton’s Morton Plant

~ Summer Break ~

Renew or become a Member of MRHS
and receive email updates about all our
meetings and events. Contact us at:
info@mystichistory.org or
860-536-4779 during office hours.

The response of the membership to receiving future issues of the Portsmouth Press and Board minutes by email has been very positive therefore, this is the last Newsletter that will be postal mailed to everyone. Starting with the next issue, any member whose dues are paid for 2012 and has not opted for the e-Newsletter will receive their copies by First Class mail; any member with an email address who has not requested printed copies will receive theirs by email. Thank you for your support. - The MRHS Board

About half of our members have already renewed for 2012 – thank you very much. If you haven’t done so already, please do so. We appreciate all your support.

We welcome a few new members--Marlene Terry Ziegler, Debi Ziegler, and Kate Dimancescu at the Individual level and M/M Frederick Odgers, M/M George Moseley and M/M John McDermott at the Family level. We regret the passing of Bill Haase and Rudy Brandt, members of MRHS.

- Cynthia Allyn, Membership Chair