Dec. 12 will mark the 60th anniversary of arguably the most destructive fire in Mystic’s history. And there have been a lot of fires in downtown Mystic over the years. Before Covid 19 put a damper on normal life, the historical society’s December program was scheduled to be a lecture on the fire and its impact. That program is now scheduled for December 2021. In its place, we have received permission to reprint a 1999 article from The Westerly Sun. During 1999, The Sun did a countdown to the new millennium by running a weekly series titled “A Century in The Sun,” looking back at significant local people and events in the 20th century. This is the story that ran on Sunday, Dec. 12, 1999.

“The Night Mystic Burned”

The worst fire in Mystic’s history happened early on a Monday morning 39 years ago today.

The inferno wiped out the buildings on both sides of East Main Street from the drawbridge to the flagpole, taking with it nine stores, six businesses and a movie theater.

The great fire of Dec. 12, 1960, is remembered not only as the worst in the village’s history, but the one that drew the fewest spectators. There were three significant reasons for that. The fire was discovered well after midnight; the temperature was a frigid 15 degrees, and the first snowstorm of the season, bordering on a blizzard, was raging.

These factors presented enormous challenges and great danger to the 200 firefighters from 11 area companies who were called out to battle the blaze.

The fire couldn’t have happened at a worse time for local merchants.

It wiped them out at the height of the Christmas season, when they were carrying their heaviest inventories. As he stood amid the ruins of his hardware store, Max Slifkin sorrowfully noted that he hadn’t banked his weekend receipts on Saturday as was his custom. He was anticipating heavy demand for change from holiday shoppers in the coming week.

“Well, it’s only money,” Slifkin told a reporter. “I can feel sorry for those firemen who braved the water and cold to do what they could for us.”

Before the fire, the Stonington side of Mystic was as tightly packed with buildings as the Groton side is today. Two of the businesses, the Strand Theater on the south side of East Main and Davey’s Newsstand on the north, were partially built on pilings in the Mystic River.

Mystic firefighter Stanton King discovered the fire as he was driving through town at 12:38 a.m. that icy Monday. Or more accurately, the fire discovered him. The windows of Slifkin’s Hardware Store exploded into the street in front of King’s car.

King pulled the nearest fire alarm then drove back across the bridge to the Hook and Ladder Co., then on Gravel Street (where the sewer pumping station is today), to get the new pumper truck.
He drove the truck across the bridge past the now-raging fire in the north side block, and positioned it on Holmes Street to prevent the structures on the east side of Holmes from being caught up in the blaze.

The explosion of Slifkin’s windows indicated the fire had been smoldering for hours during the quiet Sunday when Mystic stores were closed.

When King pulled the alarm, it was already too late to save the hardware store. The real battle for firefighters over the next several hours would be to keep the fire from spreading beyond the wooden Garbarino building that housed Slifkin’s.

Members of the B.F. Hoxie Engine Co. rushed to their station on Cottrell Street and pulled their pumper up onto the drawbridge. They were joined there shortly by members of the “Hooks” with their aerial truck. Their job was to keep the fire from jumping to the stores on the Groton side of the river as 35-mile-per-hour winds whipped the flames.

“It was going like a blast furnace when we got there,” Hoxie Lt. Al Brooks told a reporter. Firefighters had to drop suction into the river because repeated attempts to open the hydrant closest to the fire failed.

At the height of the conflagration, firefighters heard a series of sharp explosions. Paint cans from the hardware store were bursting, sending a rainbow of colors spewing into the street.

Suddenly the second-floor walls of the Garbarino building collapsed, creating a wall of fire along the edge of the pavement. Firefighters rushed in front of the fire wall with a large hose and began spraying water on the Noyes block and the south side of East Main.

Then catastrophe undid all the firefighters’ heroic efforts. A traffic light hanging overhead at East Main and Cottrell streets suddenly crash to the ground, rupturing the large hose.

With the water now spurting uselessly straight into the air, the fire was able to jump across East Main Street, setting Noyes’ Dry Goods large wooden sign ablaze. Just as suddenly, the front of the adjacent Bliss Jewelers ignited and soon the top of the Strand Theater was ringed with fire. Ten minutes later, the corner of the jewelry shop collapsed with a roar.

Buildings on both sides of East Main were now on fire. Then the second-floor front of the Berry building fell into the street with a crash.

By now fire companies from as far away as New London and Westerly had answered the call for mutual aid.

Pawcatuck Fire Chief John J. Donahue Sr. brought his company’s aerial truck up Cottrell Street in an attempt to keep the flames from consuming the 145-year-old Cottrell Lumber Co.

The morning after the fire Donahue told The Sun the vision as he rolled into Mystic was the most vivid in his nearly 50 years as a firefighter.

“It made the Bliven Opera House blaze in Westerly in the early ’20s seem like a mild affair,” he said.
Cottrell Street lies at a right angle to Main Street and that night it served as a giant funnel for the whipping wind. Smoke billowed down the street, choking firefighters and cutting off visibility. The snowstorm never penetrated the intense heat and thick smoke.

As the three-story theater was engulfed, it made the many buildings at the lumber company behind it vulnerable. Then the theater walls gave way, the west wall toppling into the river and the rear collapsing onto the roof of the lumber company’s Cash-and-Carry building. Firefighters, however, quickly doused down the roof, saving the building – and perhaps the entire lumber yard.

Other firefighters were frantically wetting down the Mystic Hotel on the corner of East Main and Cottrell streets to keep it from catching fire.

The intense heat scorched the front of the Village Coffee Shop in the hotel, shattering its plate glass windows. Luckily the wind never shifted due north, which would have driven the flames directly at the hotel and at the block of stores and residences behind it.

By 4:30 a.m. it was all over. When dawn came, only members of Mystic’s fire companies remained at the scene, mopping up and watching for flareups in the smoldering rubble that a few hours before had housed many of the stores at the heart of Mystic’s business district.
We are pleased to list all of our members for the year 2020. We sincerely thank you for your continuing support of the Mystic River Historical Society. Your dues provide the funding to offer a unique local history resource to the Mystic community as well as staff, services and physical facilities to grow, catalogue, maintain and share our collection. If you don’t find your name on this list and would like to continue your membership and newsletter subscription, and/or gift a subscription to friends or family, please, send $25 Individual, $50 Family, $75 Contributing, $150 Benefactor or $350 Sustaining to PO Box 245, Mystic. Thank you!

-Cindy Allyn, Membership and Stephen Menno, President

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...Continued
September 2020 Meeting Minutes

The Board of Trustees of the Mystic River Historical Society continue to meet virtually following the COVID-19 outbreak. The agenda for the meeting was discussed via Zoom.

Attendees were: Cindy Allyn, Lou Allyn, Marilyn Comrie, Lois Glazier, Cara Lopilato, Stephen Menno, John Parry, Nancy Potter, Lyndsey Pyrke-Fairchild, and Stephanie Thorp.

The meeting was called to order at 7:05 by President Menno.

President (S. Menno): A motion was made, seconded, and passed to accept the minutes of the 15 June 2020 meeting. • Received a courtesy email from the Connecticut Department of Transportation in regard to the guardrails located on the corner of High Street and Route 1. Repairs will be made in the next year or two. The work will generate traffic in the area of our buildings. The lack of visibility from High Street turning onto Route 1 is a known issue. • After Dorrie’s passing and Louisa's move to South Carolina, Elizabeth Boucher took over as the curatorial manager and is the only archivist on payroll. We will need to find additional staff to work in the archives. Anyone who knows of potential candidates is asked to contact Steve. It is possible we can begin the position as an internship. The position will be posted in the newsletter and possibly on social media. Will confer with Elizabeth. • Many programs and projects we were to be involved in were pushed to next year due to COVID-19 including Groton local history fair, CT Open House, Mystic River Park anniversary, and the addition of new board members. In place of the Open House, a video tour of Portersville Academy was made and posted on our website. The addition of signs in Mystic River Park will be revisited Summer 2021. There is still a need for board members, but there is a concern whether or not this is a good time to take on new candidates. Still interested in learning about potential candidates, but we may hold off on new board members’ start date. • We will start planning the 50th anniversary of MRHS. Thoughts on how we will commemorate this milestone will be discussed after a committee is formed. • The website content has been updated and this is a good time to discuss updating the website provider. Both WordPress and Square Space have been mentioned as possible updates and there are two board members with experience with these providers. MRHS is currently using FrontPage by Microsoft. • Downes Building is currently open by appointment only. Masks are mandatory and hand sanitizer is provided at the front desk.

Treasurer/Finance (L. Allyn): Cash in the Bank is $2,205.81. Expecting $350 of storage payment from Akeley Trust soon. $300 in dues have come in after membership renewal reminder letters were sent. This brings dues paid to $10,275 versus budget of $11,000 plus a $1,000 for a life membership. Donations in memory of Dorrie Hanna are $905 to date. Two checks for $50 were received in memory of Len Sawyer. Elizabeth Boucher’s pay, including Newsletter time, is projected to be on budget for the year. Because of our decline in staff, there will be $9,397.50 available in our budget as well as $1,250 because of program cancelations.

Corresponding Secretary (N. Potter): Many gifts were made in the memory of Dorrie Hanna and Len Sawyer. As of September 21, twelve thank you letters were sent out for donations in memory of Dorrie Hanna. Donors include Dave Evans, Cindy Palmer, Judy Hicks, William & Lou Ellen Scheer, Jennifer Friedman, Dawn Salerno, Jim and Cindy Turse, Lou & Cindy Allyn, Anne Craig, Carl Cascio, John & Elizabeth Komorowski, Stephanie & Barry Thorp, Howard & Irene Weiss, and Steve & Tricia Menno. Two letters were sent for donations in memory of Len Sawyer. Donors include Tim & Linda Evers and Robert & Catherine O’Connor. Letters to be sent out to Doug Hanna and Mrs. Leonard Sawyer with the names and addresses of those who made donations in the memory of their respective spouses. A donation was also made in memory of Roger & Mildred Fowler by Norma Aronson. General donations to MRHS were sent in by Bill Haupt and Catherine Zahn.

Curatorial (L. Allyn for E. Boucher): On September 3, Betsy, Steve, Cara, and Lou attended a conference call with Kate Ernest of PastPerfect. Suggestions for data and storage improvement were given and will be addressed by Betsy before transferring to PastPerfect Web Edition. Kate will schedule an October setup of a trial site for our data.

Information Technology (S. Thorp): On 29 August 2020 the System Administrator performed the securities updates and backups for the Society’s computers. All the devices were found to be operating properly and communicating successfully with the network and with the printer. • On 10 September we received a message from the archives manager that she was having a recurring problem with the scanner’s not connecting to PastPerfect for scans. On investigation, it was found that a probable hardware failure was preventing the scanner’s ability to connect to the computer for any services. Substituting a replacement scanner confirmed that the MRHS scanner had a hardware interface problem. Troubleshooting failed to correct the problem. The substitute scanner has been donated to MRHS, restoring the functions needed to input image data into the PastPerfect archive. No further action is required at this time. • Backups were performed on MRHS1, 2, and 3 to offsite storage. All three computers were updated with the latest Microsoft and security updates and tested for proper operation on the network.

Membership (C. Allyn): Between early May and the end of September, we gained five new memberships. During the same time period, nine of our members have passed away.

Newsletter (S. Menno): The book club meetings were announced in the summer newsletter. The meetings will be held via Zoom.

Programs (S. Menno for M. Austin): Potential book event to take place virtually in February. Looking to survey others about their thoughts on other MRHS virtual programs. • October and December speaker meetings have been canceled.

Social Media (L. Pyrke-Fairchild): Posts throughout the summer have received a great response from the public. Lyndsey is looking to continue her past project of Mystic houses/buildings no longer standing and may use some in upcoming digital content.

Lower Mystic Cemetery (L. Allyn): Tree fell in the northeast corner of the property. There is a volunteer willing to remove it.

Next Meeting— 19 October 2020 at 7:00pm via Zoom.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:25pm.
Respectfully submitted by Cara Lopilato (Recording Secretary)
THEN: View of the Standard Machinery Co. on Water St., ca. 1925. The Factory Square complex now stands on this site. Charles Stark mentions the company in his history of Groton. In 1848, the Randall brothers founded the Reliance Machine Co., which up to the time of the Civil War successfully manufactured cotton gins and related machines. The company later became the Pequot Machine Co., the Cotton Gin Co., and in 1873, the Sanborn Machine Co. William N. Peterson, in his book "Mystic Built," notes that George Greenman & Co. was the principal owner of the Standard Machinery Co. in 1878, manufacturing printing presses, paper cutters, and other items. A later owner, Thomas Stillman, sold the company to Charles Wheeler in 1904. Wheeler rebuilt the building in brick. He and his sons, Norton and John, continued the bookbinding machinery business, later adding presses for molding and cutting plastics, rubber and other materials.

The sign on the building reads:

"THE STANDARD MACHINERY CO.

NOW: Today the building forms part of Factory Square. One of the current tenants is the Barley Head Brewery.

Reader Tips:

Groton Long Point resident Dr. Keith Barker recently retired as a professor of computer science and engineering in the University of Connecticut School of Engineering. His interest in the history of local railroads led to the creation of two fascinating You Tube videos: Westerly to Mystic at https://youtu.be/COYRbth3MB0 and At Grade 2 at https://youtu.be/BApiEf2e_BI

In a similar vein you can also read *A Trolley Ride - Groton and Stonington Street Railway* 1907 by Grace D. Wheeler. Also see our Virtual Exhibit on trolleys.

Guided Tours:
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Hear the stories, see the views, learn the history, feel the sea, taste the food! Experience the magic of Mystic in a small group with a local guide that brings it to life.
Not the World’s First Pandemic, Part II

By Stephanie Thorp

Back in the September issue of Portersville Press, we learned about diseases in history, in order to develop some perspective on our own experience with Covid-19. Part II deals with the development of the concept and implementation of Public Health, with its emphasis on controlling disease and improving the health and welfare of the public in general.

According to Michael Oldstone, in his book, Viruses, Plagues, & History, the most important benefit of controlling infectious diseases is alleviation of pain and suffering, in addition to the substantial monetary savings due to reduced or eliminated hospitalization and treatment. Individuals who would otherwise be incapacitated have recovered and are healthy and able to function (e.g., work, buy goods, pay taxes). He provides an estimate that says for each dollar invested by a government in basic research to study these diseases, a return of at least 1,000- to 10,000-fold has been realized in terms of those who are financially productive, instead of requiring long-term care. Yet with success typically comes complacency, and a lessening of general awareness that viral diseases will always remain a threat. It will require continuing research, surveillance, and education of the populace to control newly emerging diseases and prevent reemergence of viruses once thought tamed.

The concept of managing public health began to develop thousands of years ago. In ancient Greece, then Rome, public officials recognized the importance of basic public needs, including clean water and sanitary disposal of waste. When the Roman Empire collapsed, its influence on Western Europe also collapsed. Western Europe was far more primitive than Greece and Rome. When the machinery of government broke down, the public health improvements that had been put in place by the Romans deteriorated because nothing was done to maintain them.

During the Middle Ages, communities, then cities, realized that they needed to do something about the basic human needs of clean water and sewage disposal. Slowly they recreated these capabilities. As time passed, they moved on to other public needs, including:

- Protecting the consumer by banning tainted meat and other food in medieval marketplaces, and requiring regular cleaning of those marketplaces;
- Protecting the public from the many diseases that were rampant over the centuries: leprosy; bubonic plague; syphilis; smallpox; diphtheria; measles; influenza; tuberculosis; scabies; anthrax, and trachoma, to name only a few.
- Providing facilities where sick people could be nursed (the development of hospitals);
- Providing health and personal hygiene education.

This list doesn’t even mention diseases that have become widespread in our own lifetimes, such as polio, and all the different kinds of influenza that arise continually.

One of the earliest approaches to protecting the public from disease was the use of quarantine. The term comes from the early Venetians’ approach: 40 days (quaranta giorni) must elapse before a ship with disease on board was allowed to dock. The Venetians were the first to adopt a quarantine strategy. Recall that in those days, disease was characteristically carried on board trading vessels. Venice was a huge and busy port, and quarantining ships from the Levant or other areas was very helpful in controlling communicable diseases. This policy dates back to the 14th century.

In addition to quarantining ships, Venice adopted policies to separate sick people from well people, and ordered quarantining not only for them, but for anyone who had come in contact with them; the quarantine to last 14 days. The Venetian quarantine practices spread from there along the coasts and eventually inland. Eventually all over Europe, quarantines were ordered for sufferers of these and other diseases, and for their contacts and caretakers.

It was about then that the basic concept of hospitals arose. The earliest hospitals were monastic and cared for monks and priests. Much later on, the use of hospitals spread to the public. Hospitals developed in “fits and starts” over the next 1000-1500 years, until they have become the hospitals of today, much improved over hospitals that were available 1000 years ago.

Health and hygiene books became quite popular during the Middle Ages. They included instruction on housing, food, bodily cleanliness, nutrition, moderation in diet, and proper sleep habits. In addition, for some years, bathhouses were very popular (the notion that regular baths were a good thing hasn’t been around forever), right up until syphilis became widespread, at which point they fell out of favor.
One of the first new concepts arising with the onset of the Renaissance was the development and application of statistics. According to the German sociologist Simmel, “the quantitatively exact interpretation of nature is the theoretical counterpart of finance”. In other words, if you could quantify money, you could quantify things like population and disease. Detailed statistical records pertaining to cities were available in Italian cities as early as the 14th century.

These statistics were linked to the evolution of the national state, which had never existed prior to this time. “National state” implies the growth and consolidation of central governments, made possible by the economic activity with those consolidated areas. This “trend” is tied to the desire for wealth and the realization of the usefulness of technology in the accumulation of power by rulers.

This culminated in the realization that keeping the population healthy and strong contributed to the power and wealth of the rulers and the merchant class by ensuring that a regular supply of workers was available whenever and wherever needed. Yup, health of the public was a political issue even then. To this end, there was a great interest by scientists in investigating the causes of disease and the behavior of the human body and its many internal systems.

The issues of clean safe water and garbage removal continued as primary concerns of towns as well as governments. There was a lot of trial and error involved. One famous incident during the mid-19th century (we’ve seen an entire episode of “Victoria” devoted to it) was the cholera outbreak in London that resulted in the identification of a single public pump (everyone got their water from public pumps) that was contaminated, and it was contaminated because a sewage line ran very close to the water source and leaked into it. That’s how easy it is to produce a cholera outbreak.

Once scientists had identified bacteria and viruses as pathogens, they pursued the natural course: invent vaccines to prevent them. Edward Jenner famously pursued smallpox vaccination, which had to evolve from the use of active smallpox culture to the use of cowpox culture, and finally, years later, to an actual vaccine. The vaccine is made from a virus called vaccinia, which is a poxvirus similar to smallpox, but less harmful. The smallpox vaccine contains live vaccinia virus, not a killed or weakened virus like many other vaccines.

In spite of advances made between the 18th and the 20th century in the area of vaccines to prevent epidemics of lethal diseases, an equal challenge was convincing the public to vaccinate. Anti-vaxxers are not new. They appeared when vaccines appeared, and have continued to question the safety and efficacy of vaccines for hundreds of years.

During the rise of industrialism, authorities finally took a much greater notice of the need for sanitary conditions among the poor. It was easy to tell poor people to wash their hands, drink safe water, stick to safe clean foods, and save money for the future, but if people don’t know where their next meal is coming from, or where they will sleep that night, or own a single set of clothing (and a ragged set at that), and haven’t the money to pay rent, let alone save it…well, anyone who’s read a few historical romances set in 18th or 19th century London is probably familiar with the story of poverty.

So Poor Laws arose in the 19th century to task parishes with the duty of providing relief for the indigent, while parishes attempted to reduce this burden as much as possible by limiting the amount of aid they would provide. This resulted in the development of the workhouse as an institution. Eventually, workhouses evolved to be little more than prisons for the poor. “Since the system of poor relief was supposed to be the chief obstacle to a perfectly elastic supply of labor for industry, the remedy proposed was to do away with assistance to the able-bodied poor, and thus to free labor for economic self-interest”, according to George Rosen, in his History of Public Health.

He continued, quoting Joseph Priestly, “individuals who left to themselves are, in general, sufficiently provident and will daily better their circumstances”. Poverty and idleness ought to be governed by reason and necessity, and not by any legal provision for the poor, which could act only as an incitement to idleness, he said.

“The principles on which relief was to be granted were openly deterrent. No able-bodied persons and their families were to be given assistance except in a well-regulated workhouse. In addition, the lot of the able-bodied pauper was to be made “less eligible”, or, in other words, more miserable than that of the worst-situated laborer outside the workhouse.
Then, as the pendulum swung, those who administered the Poor Law looked at statistics showing the high rates of disease, and mortality of all ages, and realized that instead of promoting better health and employment, workhouse conditions promoted disease and poor health. So the tide turned to attempt to provide some sort of medical care and hygienic environment for paupers. Over hundreds of years, our own society and others have striven to care for the most vulnerable among us.

And in the history of public health, epidemics occupy a prominent place among the situations that precipitate action in the interest of the community’s health.

One of the mantras of our times is “We’re all in this together”. This is not a new sentiment. Our religious institutions remind us, and our secular institutions as well. So, here’s food for thought, from John Donne, the 17th century English poet, who famously wrote in his meditations (#17, to be exact),

“No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

~ ~ ~

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With additional thanks to Wikipedia, the National Institutes of Health, Biography.com, Centers for Disease Control, and other web-based information sources.

What’s “New” in our Collections?

By Elizabeth Boucher

Just two weeks ago I received an interesting research query from a professor at Washington Adventist University who was looking for information on a musical instrument owned by Palmer Gallup (born in Mystic in 1802 and buried at Elm Grove Cemetery). The instrument in question, a "mammoth double bass viol, the largest of its kind in the world" was custom made for Gallup in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1837 and was played by him at the 1872 World Peace Jubilee in Boston.

A description of the instrument in Gallup’s last will and testament and a detailed history of the instrument, written by Gallup’s son Mozart, were both found in a collection of correspondence and personal papers from the Gallup, Fish and Edgecomb families donated by Sarah Ingle in July of this year. Gallup’s double bass is currently owned by the Firelands Historical Society in Norwalk, Ohio.

Holiday Updates

The Board of Trustees of the Mystic River Historical Society wishes you a very happy holiday season. It is hard to believe that the holidays are almost upon us. This has certainly been a strange and challenging year. We thank you for your membership and continued support. Most important, we hope that you and your family are in good health and that the coming year is joyful and peaceful. Thank you!

As is our custom, the MRHS will be closed Thanksgiving week, November 23 ~ 27; Christmas week, December 21 ~ 25; and New Year’s week, December 28 ~ January 1. We will re-open on Tuesday, January 5, 2021 at 9 a.m. We will be monitoring our email and our Facebook page. Happy Holidays to all.
Events Calendar

7pm Wednesday, November 11, 2020
History Book Club—MRHS & Mystic-Noank Library Partnership
Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492-1763
By Henry Kamen (1st Half)

7pm Wednesday, December 9, 2020
History Book Club—MRHS & Mystic-Noank Library Partnership
Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492-1763
By Henry Kamen (2nd Half)

Speaker Program Note

The Board of MRHS has decided that we will not have any indoor programs during the first 6 months of 2021. We are considering several options to provide programs for the benefit of our membership. We plan to send a brief survey to our members to determine areas of interest. Look for it soon!

Donations are always welcome. Renew or become a Member of MRHS for updates about our events. Contact us at info@mystichistory.org

Membership Updates

We welcome new members Sarah Willey and Lynn Schroder, and regret the passing of members Mary Anderson, Marcia Robinson and Leonard Sawyer.

-Cindy Allyn, Membership

Newsletter/Print Patrons

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