As we celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, much of the focus has been on the service of Connecticut’s soldiers and the steadfast support they received from their home communities. But for four long years, while the armies of the Union and Confederacy met across battle lines from Pennsylvania to Texas, another war was being fought on a very different field of battle. Catherine Deichmann’s 7:30 presentation on Wednesday, October 22nd at the Mystic Congregational Church Hall focuses on the Confederate strategy of global commerce raiding, and its impact on maritime New England, particularly on the communities of Mystic and Noank.

Catherine Deichmann has degrees in both American History and American Studies, and is employed as a researcher and interpreter of US maritime history at Mystic Seaport. Much of her past work has focused on the maritime commerce of the Civil War, including blockade running through St. George’s Bermuda, and on the effect of the war on New England’s coastal communities. The MRHS presentation is based on a paper she originally presented at a Dublin Seminar on “New England and the Civil War”, which will soon be published by Historic Deerfield. Deichmann’s current research explores the impact of World War I on whaling and the Atlantic fisheries.

For more on the Sesquicentennial series, “Life on the Homefront”, see pages 4-5.
As the end of summer passes, thoughts turn to all kinds of things, including the reflective kind (and, no, nothing to do with a summer reading list—trust me, you should thank me for refusing to reflect on any of it). This year, between world and local events, I found myself reflecting on the value of a devotion to remembering and preserving the past instead of the end of summer passes, thoughts turn to all kinds of things, including the reflective kind (and, no, nothing to do with a summer reading list—trust me, you should thank me for refusing to reflect on any of it). This year, between world and local events, I found myself reflecting on the value of a devotion to remembering and preserving the past instead of the present.

Don’t worry, I’m not about to suggest that historical societies in general, including our own Mystic River Historical Society, have no purpose—you can put the phone down, there’s no need to call in demanding this column be terminated (well, at least not for that reason, anyway). And, yes, I’m fully aware of how often I berate you all about the need to reflect on the past to understand our present properly. But, do any of you wonder, sometimes, about the extent to which devotion to remembering and preserving the past instead leads to continued strife in the present?

It should be of no particular surprise that most, if not all, of the current disputes around the world arise from or are based on understandings of the past. The problem, however, is that those understandings are themselves in conflict, leading inevitably to conflict in real terms. So, the question seems inevitable—if we chose not to remember the past (Santayana is not spinning in his grave just yet, at least not until he gets to the end of the column), might we all find it easier to navigate the world we live in?

An article in the New York Times earlier this year could certainly lead one to contemplate the need for a future without a past. The article, entitled “Blue and Gray Still in Conflict at a Battle Site”, reports on a modern dispute over how to remember the Civil War. Olustee, Florida, the site of a significant Civil War battle in early 1864 that most of us have never heard about, in which 1,000 Confederate and 2,000 Union soldiers were killed, wounded or reported missing, found itself at the center of a renewed dispute about remembering the battle.

The Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park, apparently the very first state park in Florida, has three monuments commemorating Confederate soldiers, but none commemorating the Union soldiers who fought and died there. That fact is not terribly surprising, as the article notes, given the old saying in Florida that the farther north you go, the farther south Tallahassee is located. Southern sympathies run much deeper than they do in, say, Miami.

So, when the Florida chapter of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War requested that they be permitted to place an obelisk in the state park to honor Union soldiers who fought and died at the battle, the Sons of Confederate Veterans were enraged, viewing even mere consideration of the request by the state’s Parks Department as a betrayal.

At a hearing, speaker after speaker denounced the Union proposal. As one said (echoing the feelings of some here in Mystic about how the Mystic Historic District Commission should operate), “It’s like any other historical building. You put something brand new in there and it destroys the significance of it.”

Hmmmm. So, the historical societies representing descendants of Confederate and Union soldiers are, at least in Olustee, Florida, not content to let bygones be bygones and seem intent on continuing the fight (150 years later!). One can only sigh in contemplation of such devotion to the past.

So, what does this all say about how we conduct ourselves here in Mystic? I’m proud to say that we look reasonably good in comparison. A perusal of the editions of this Newsletter, attendance at any of our events, and a visit to our facilities demonstrates consistently that we do what a conscientious society should do—we present the past in an objective, non-partisan manner which permits individual and, occasionally, group reflection on the past, in an effort to preserve, not a partisan view, but the truth, wherever it leads. I trust you all agree. If only the rest of the world did, too.

To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history? ~ Marcus Tullius Cicero

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 - Bill Everett  
Treasurer - Barry Thorp  •  Corresponding Secretary - Lois Glazer  •  Recording Secretary - Cindy Allyn  

The Newsletter of the Mystic River Historical Society is published six times annually:  September, October, November-December, January-February, March-April and May • Box 245 Mystic, CT 06355  
Issues of the newsletter are available for online viewing at www.mystichistory.org
The year is 1637, and the Pequots and the English, both intelligent, energetic and enterprising people, have collided in Connecticut. The English are recent arrivals from Europe by way of Massachusetts. The Pequots, led by Sassacus, are also new, moving from the interior, making enemies of the Mohegans and the Narragansetts in the process. At first, they trade furs for metal and cloth goods, as they feel each other out. But their competitive natures soon lead to violence. English traders and settlers are killed; Pequot crops and dwellings are burned. Both groups appear to believe in the right of conquest, meaning that if a nation is strong enough to dispossess another, it may.

On April 23, 1637, two hundred Pequot warriors attack the settlement called Wethersfield, killing six men and three women working in the fields, and carrying off two 15-year-old girls. Eight days later, representatives from Hartford, Windsor and Wethersfield meet and declare war. They authorize a force of 90 men and appoint Captain John Mason commander.

The 37-year-old Mason had developed his martial skills fighting as a lieutenant of English volunteers, alongside the Protestant Dutch against the Catholic Spaniards in the Netherlands. After returning to England, he sailed for Massachusetts in 1630 with a group of Puritans. There, he trained militia and led a force chasing a pirate before joining a party from Dorchester going to colonize the Connecticut valley in 1634. When they got near Hartford, Cpt. Mason & his militia found previous settlers from Plymouth as well as Dutch traders. A group from England arrived shortly thereafter, and soon they were all fighting among themselves: allies in other circumstances, but deadly rivals when it came to the acquisition of prime land. The Dorchester party ended up with most of what is present-day Windsor.

The English were united again, however, against the Pequots. In early May, Mason and his men sail down the Connecticut River along with some hundred Mohegans commanded by Uncas, who take this opportunity to settle their own scores with the Pequots. At Fort Saybrook, they are joined by soldiers from Massachusetts commanded by Cpt. John Underhill.

The Pequots expect an attack near the mouth of the Thames River and assemble at present day Ocean Beach and Eastern Point. But the English sail past, assaulted by insults from the Pequots such as soldiers like to exchange on such occasions. Mason has decided to go on to Rhode Island, gather more men from the Narragansetts (who are also opponents of the Pequots), and maneuver overland. On May 26th, Mason's force is in position to attack a large, fortified Pequot village in what is now Mystic, near the intersection of Pequot Avenue and Clift Street. The fort covers about an acre and is surrounded by a 6-foot palisade of tree trunks. It has two narrow entrances filled with brush to prevent easy access. Inside are hundreds of Pequots living in bark wigwams.
As the long summer winds down, the war of attrition continues across the South. Petersburg and Atlanta are under siege. Sheridan is burning the Shenandoah Valley, eastern Tennessee is one huge battleground, and fighting continues in the Deep South as the Union vise continues to tighten. In Mystic, the warmest summer in forty-two years ends with steamboat excursions to Watch Hill, a “Monster Clam Bake” hosted by I.W. Denison, Esq., at Captain Thomas Miner’s farm on Quambaug Cove, the arrival of Stone, Rosston & Co’s “New York Circus and O-Kee-na-wa-ha’s Indian Troupe,” and, inevitably, the start of a new school term.

The war of attrition is wearing down both sides, and the struggle to fill yet another quota of soldiers sparks a battle on the home front. In early September, a Town Meeting is called “for the purpose of giving additional bounty to volunteers and aiding residents of the town to procure substitutes, in order to fill the town’s quota.” The attendees empower the Selectmen to draw on the Town Treasury to pay $300 for 1-year, $500 for 2-year, and $1,000 for 3-year enlistees. The next week, another Town Meeting is warned “by those citizens of Stonington who are dissatisfied with the action of the first meeting.” This second meeting ups the ante for enlistees, and votes to reimburse the costs of providing a substitute. Some leading businessmen warn that this could bring the wealthy town of Stonington close to bankruptcy, but it is clear the local citizenry will do almost anything to protect their own from being forced to fight.

The long fingers of war reach into New England. A Confederate plot to capture the Long Island Sound Steamers is uncovered, and four Federal gunboats are sent to protect the steamboat fleet. A captured steamboat, Electric Spark, was to serve as a Trojan horse among the fleet. The Confederate raider Tallahassee steams into Newport Harbor and leaves unchallenged. “Yellow Jack,” the deadly yellow fever, breaks out in Westerly and New London, brought by returning sailors. Superior Court in New London is adjourned until the threat passes, and the opening of school is delayed.

By the end of the month, some breaks in the clouds of war can be seen. Atlanta falls on September 7. Civic generosity in towns across the state allow Connecticut’s quota of soldiers to be filled, avoiding the national draft on September 19. Sheridan’s victory in the Shenandoah sparks a torchlight parade that begins in Old Mystic, and led by the Mystic Drum Band, marches through town stopping at the homes of prominent Union men to hear patriotic addresses.

1903 “Steamer Ella” article at right from GoogleNews - The Day
The lead news item in the weekly paper, “The Progress of the War,” has grown to fill two columns, sometimes more. Reports from every front have replaced local events, such as the Soldiers Aid Society Fair at Floral Hall, in priority. The war dominates the news, but shipbuilding continues to dominate the local economy. Almost every week, a new vessel is launched from one of the many local shipyards. In October, a 155’ screw steamer is launched from the Hill and Grinnell yard. Hill and Grinnell had closed before the war, but now with new investors hoping to profit from the war boom, the yard is back in business, and almost before the first vessel hits the water, another keel is being laid.

Not all the shipping news is good. One night in early in October the steamboat Electric, running from New York to Providence, is struck by an unknown schooner between Little Gull and Watch Hill. Two days later, the steamer Aphrodite, running from New York to New Orleans under charter for the War Department, goes ashore on the beach at Cape Lookout, North Carolina. Built and owned by Maxson & Fish, she was on only her second trip south. Correspondence from local soldiers rarely appears in the paper these days. The US Army mail, chaotic and unreliable at the beginning of the war, is now efficiently keeping soldiers and their communities connected. Season after season, battle after battle, news from the front is simply not new anymore. Most of the units that contain local “boys” are now stationed in Virginia. The 1st CT Heavy Artillery is on the siege line around Petersburg. The 1st CT Cavalry, attached to Sheridan’s army in the Shenandoah, suffered heavy casualties in fighting around Cedar Run Church in mid-October. The 8th, 10th, 14th, and 21st are skirmishing along the James River, and digging trenches around Richmond. Lt. J. Alden Rathbun of the 8th is wounded at the capture of Fort Harrison, just days before his term of enlistment is due to expire. The 13th is still on the march through the Shenandoah with Sheridan. Further afield, the 5th Regiment CVI is assigned to General Sherman’s army, occupying Atlanta. As fall arrives, many units are starting to think about preparing winter quarters for what will be the fourth winter of the war, a war that many people, back in the heady days of April 1861, thought would not last a summer.

An 1862 photo of volunteers to the Civil War Company K, 26th Regiment, Conn., Simeon G. Fish, Ladd Latham, Herbert Ellery, Capt. Jedediah Randall, Orville Tift. Explore the MRHS Civil War image gallery at mystichistory.org

Appelman information from: olivercromwellcase.wordpress.com

The steamer “Ulysses” built during the 1860s at Mystic’s Maxson Fish yard.
The Board of Trustees of the Mystic River Historical Society met on Monday, June 16, 2014. Attendees included: Aimeé Allaire, Cindy Allyn, Lou Allyn, David Evans, Sally Halsey, Cathy Marco, Jennifer Pryor, Richard Semeraro, Barry Thorp, Stephanie Thorp. A motion was made, seconded and approved to accept May meeting minutes as published.

Nominations were made for the following slate of officers:
President – Louis Allyn
Vice President – William Everett
Treasurer – Barry Thorp
Corresponding Secretary – Lois Glazier
Recording Secretary – Cynthia Allyn
A motion was made, seconded & passed electing officers as presented.

The President then appointed the follow Committee Chairmen:
Finance (Interim) – David Evans
House & Grounds – David Scott
Program & Membership – Aimeé Allaire
Education & Outreach – Margaret Austin
Marketing & Special Events – Sally Halsey
Information Technology (Interim) – Stephanie Thorp
Curatorial – Lou Allyn (Acting)
The Board concurred with the nominations.

Treasurer (B. Thorp): For the period of 19 May to 15 June 2014, all deposits have been made and all bills are paid current. The Treasurer’s account books are reconciled with the Chelsea Groton Bank statements. During this period income included deposits to the Chelsea Groton checking account as well as payments. Expenses were essentially non-discretionary payments for services and operations. At this time the Chelsea checking account balance is positive.

Curatorial (L. Allyn, acting): Dorrie Hanna is preparing a list of MRHS books currently stored at the Mystic Noank Library that will be brought back to the Downes Building. The Curatorial Committee is scheduling coverage during the summer when Dorrie is on vacation.

Information Technology (S. Thorp): The System Administrator performed backups & updates in June. All equipment appears to be in good condition and functioning as designed. A USB3 PCI card was installed on the main PC to speed up the transfer of data between the computer hard drive and the backup drive. Time to perform backups was reduced from over an hour to less than 30 minutes.

Marketing & Special Events (S. Halsey): Books published by MRHS are now being sold on Amazon. MHS leaders are encouraged to add reviews.

Program & Membership (A. Allaire): Alan Ganong’s talk on Local Sawmills on Wednesday May 28th went well, $53 in donations and about 60 people attended. Our next program isn’t until October 22 when Catherine Deichman talks about the Civil War in our area. The committee meets next month to continue speaker planning for 2015.

Two new memberships were added since the last meeting.

Unlisted Committees had no reports.

The next meeting is September 15, 2014 7:00 pm at the Mystic Noank Library

Respectfully submitted, Cindy Allyn

MRHS Clean-Up Day

The October 4th work morning was very productive. Barry Thorp shoveled a lot of stones left by snow plowing from the edges of the parking lot back to the center while Lou used a weed whacker to cut the grass around Portersville Academy and edge the sidewalks. Then Barry cut down the saplings behind the fence along the cliff while Lou trimmed trees and bushes and weeded. Richard Semeraro pitched in by picking up the debris and spreading grass seed. (Milorganite fertilizer and pelletized lime had been put down in September.)

MRHS Publications on Amazon

Support MRHS from the comfort of your chair! Our publications are now available by searching “Mystic River Historical Society” or by specific name on Amazon.com. If you already own & enjoy a title, consider giving it a review... or sending it as a gift!
In case you’ve not yet taken a peek, here is a sampling of photos of MRHS members, contributors and events that can be found on our facebook page -- what a fun bunch! Stop by facebook.com/mystichistory for a visit and “like” us to keep up to date!

Handy Tip for Online Readers, remember to click web links and mentions throughout the newsletter - they are hyperlinked for quick, direct access to the annotated website.
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Calendar of Events

Sat., October 4th, 2014, 9am - noon
MRHS Work Day

Wed., Oct 22nd, 2014, 7:30p
Mystic Congregational Church Hall
at Broadway and E. Main St., Mystic
Catherine Deichmann presents discussions on the Civil War

Wed., Oct 29th, 2014, 7:00p
Special Program at & with Mystic Noank Library
in alignment with CT Humanities’ “Connecticut at Work”
Rudy Favretti and the Rossie Velvet Mill

Membership Updates

Membership renewal letters were sent out in September, and new members are welcome to MRHS at any time! Stop by a free membership meeting (listed above) or contact us at info@mystichistory.org or 860-536-4779. Memberships also make great gifts!