



MANSFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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November 2015

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

This year, the fall colors are vibrant, inviting us to take a walk in the woods to enjoy the natural beauty of New England. My thanks go out to Past President John Meyers for officiating the September Annual meeting of the Mansfield Historical Society. The proposed slate of officers was unanimously elected and the 2015-2016 Executive Council members are listed on the back page of this newsletter. Following the meeting, Rick Spencer presented a rousing program on the music of World War I.

Joan DeBella has stepped down from her position of Hospitality Chair and I thank her for many years of ensuring that MHS programs were well supplied with tasty refreshments. Please contact us if you are interested in filling this vacant position; the Hospitality Chair coordinates with other MHS volunteers to provide refreshments for MHS events.

Museum Director Ann Galonska submitted the pre-application for a Historic Preservation Technical Assistance Grant from the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation. At its September 28th meeting, the Mansfield Town Council approved setting aside \$15,000 in matching Town funds if a grant is approved. The grant would cover half of the cost of a condition assessment study of the two buildings that we rent from the Town. The study would identify all needed repairs, prioritize them, and provide a cost estimate for each repair. Bruce Clouette and several MHS board members attended that Town Council Meeting. Bruce's expert testimony on this type of grant helped ensure passage of the motion to fund the required match.

On Sunday, October 18th, our Walktober Tour of the Mansfield Hollow Dam, Kirby Mill and Hydro Project was a great success. Pre-registration resulted in both tours being filled before the event. Nothing but positive comments were heard throughout the day. This was the first time that the interior of the Mansfield Hollow Dam was opened for a tour since the celebration of the dam's 50th anniversary in 2002. We thank the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers rangers for leading the very informative tours.

(Continued next page)



*Touring the tunnel within the
Mansfield Hollow Dam spillway*

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Friday, November 13, 7:00 p.m.: NOVEMBER MEETING & PROGRAM

Walter Woodward, Connecticut State Historian, will present an illustrated talk, "Leaving Connecticut, Shaping America." This event will be held at the Buchanan Auditorium at the Mansfield Public Library (Route 89 in Mansfield Center).

(President's column continued):

We are also indebted to Sam and Michelle Shifrin, owners of the Kirby Mill and the Mansfield Hollow hydropower project. They personally led the tours of the Kirby Mill and the hydro station, demonstrating all the hard work and Yankee ingenuity that went into rehabbing the mill and building a state-of-the-art hydropower generating plant.



Sam Shifrin describing the design and construction of the hydropower project

Thanks also go to: Ann Galonska, Kay Holt and Bill Altomare for organizing the event; Bruce Clouette, Jamie Lang-Rodean, Anne Bennett, Marietta Johnson, Anne Greineder and Dick Roberts; tour leaders; Donna Clouette and Pam Roberts for helping with check-in and Mansfield Boy Scout Troop 56 for their assistance with parking. A total of 129 people participated in the tours. Managing and coordinating an event of this size would not have been possible without the help of our many volunteers.

Please consider volunteering to serve on one of our committees; we are a small organization and our volunteers really do make a difference.

Our next program will be on Friday, November 13th and our speaker is State Historian Walter Woodward. I hope that you will be able to attend - his programs are always interesting and entertaining. You won't be disappointed.

Earlier this month, our membership renewal notices were mailed out. We ask that you please renew your membership at your earliest opportunity.

As the holidays approach, also remember that the books published by our Society make great gifts for anyone who loves history. Town Historian Roberta Smith's new book, *Secrets of My Old Spring Hill House* is now available, along with numerous other publications on local history.

Should you have any suggestions for the Historical Society and its museum, please contact Ann Galonska or me via mail, phone (860-429-6575) or e-mail (mansfield.historical@snet.net).

Keith Wilson, President

STATE HISTORIAN TO SPEAK AT NOVEMBER 13 MEETING

We are pleased to once again welcome Walter W. Woodward, Connecticut's State Historian, as the speaker at our November meeting. Over the past decade, he has presented several programs for our Society, all of which have been much enjoyed. His knowledge, sense of humor, and richly illustrated PowerPoint presentations have made him one of New England's most sought after public lecturers.

At our November meeting, Dr. Woodward will present his program, "Leaving Connecticut, Shaping America." Between 1780 and 1830, tens of thousands of Connecticutans left our state to "begin the world anew" in places like Pennsylvania, Vermont, western New York, and especially, the Connecticut Reserve of what is now Ohio. In the process, they took the culture of their home state with them, and gave the nation a strong and indelible Connecticut character.

In his fast-paced and copiously illustrated talk, Woodward will discuss the reasons behind Connecticut's massive outmigration, the distinctive attributes of the people who chose to leave, and the very serious concerns their removal raised for those they left behind.

Given the concerns state leaders have today over the outmigration of Connecticut's younger generations, this is a timely topic that will leave you with much to talk about.

Walter W. Woodward is the fifth person to hold the position of State Historian, which was created in the 1930s in preparation for Connecticut's 300th anniversary. He has served as State Historian since 2004.

In addition to his work as State Historian, he is also an associate professor of Early American History at the University of Connecticut. Prof. Woodward is a scholar of Early American and Atlantic World history, with an emphasis on Connecticut and New England. His research interests cover a variety of subjects, including witchcraft, alchemy and the history of science, the use of music in Early America, and environmental history.

Before becoming a historian, Woodward had successful careers in both the music and advertising industries. He was the composer of two hit country songs ("Marty Gray" and "It Could'a Been Me") in the 1970s, as well as music for film and television, for which he won two Emmy Awards and two special achievement awards from SESAC. His advertising creativity won him 8 Clio Awards, and in 1980 he was Cleveland's Advertising Person of the Year.

We hope you will join us on November 13, 7:00 p.m. for this special program. It will be held at the Buchanan Auditorium at the Mansfield Public Library. **Admission is free to members and children under 16; \$3.00 for non-members.**

KEEP THOSE 2016 DUES COMING!

The first dues renewal notice for the 2016 MHS year was mailed on October 7, along with a membership form inviting you to explore a diverse list of volunteer opportunities with us. We appreciate the prompt attention by those who have already returned forms and payment. Keeping dues payments up-to-date and making additional donations as you feel moved helps present an accurate active member profile for grant applications and reports and helps us plan the 2016 budget with more accurate projections for dues income. It is exciting to announce that we reached a 33% renewal rate by October 21, with 100 of the close to 300 members responding so far! We are well on our way toward meeting the goal of recording at least an 80% renewal rate by January 31, 2016.

Please complete the interests and skills survey when you return your dues renewal forms. Once compiled, this information will help us get to know you better, build community amongst our members, and allow MHS to accomplish so much more than your elected leadership alone could.

I am excited to be working with other elected and appointed leaders and with YOU, our members to update our information and collect dues in timely ways to best support the Society.

Finally, I remind you that YOU, our members, are our best resource for recruiting new memberships. If you hear of someone interested in our Society, I am glad to send information via email or postal mail to personally explain the benefits of membership and invite them to join or re-instate if they have been dropped from our active mailing list.

Feel free to contact me with any membership questions or with referrals for recruiting new members (860 428-2406, drpamptSCC@charter.net).

Pam Roberts, Membership Chair

A SUCCESSFUL SUMMER AND A BUSY FALL AT THE MUSEUM

We have just concluded another successful season at the museum. The museum opened on June 7 and during the summer months we welcomed visitors from throughout Connecticut and from states coast to coast. Once again I want to thank Pam

Roberts who coordinated the volunteer hosts for the summer and all those who hosted.

There was a great deal of interest in the exhibit about the building of the Mansfield Hollow Dam. This prompted our planning of the Walktober event on October 18 that featured tours of the dam, Kirby mill and hydro project. Over the coming months we will also be working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to develop a permanent kiosk at the dam site that will contain information and photographs pertaining to the history of the Mansfield Hollow flood control project.



Michelle Shifrin describes the original mill complex, built by the National Thread Company in 1882.

The exhibit based on the diaries of Martin and Almira Parker also attracted many visitors, including several descendants of the Parker, Hibbard and Phelps families who came from several states. Members of the Coventry and Andover Historical Societies also plan to visit the museum on November 1. Several members of the Parker family resided in their towns.

On October 17, we also hosted the fall meeting of the New England Lace Group. Museum Director Ann Galonska presented a program about Mansfield's early home silk industry in the morning, while members of NELG gave demonstrations of bobbin lace making in the afternoon. The event attracted quite an appreciative audience.

Although the museum closed for the season on September 27, the library remains open year-round by appointment. Please call or email if you want to access the archives. The museum will open again next June and you can look forward to a variety of new exhibits and programs.

At this time of the year, the attention now shifts to the collections. The summer exhibits are coming down and we again are tackling the backlog of cataloging and our storage issues. We will soon begin planning our exhibits for next year. Please

contact me if you would like to join the Museum Committee. Extra hands and ideas are always welcomed!

Ann Galonska, Museum Director

THE CHAFFEEVILLE SILK MILL BURNS

As one of his first volunteer projects, Daniel Allie organized a large collection of letters written by members of the Barrows family between 1837 and 1873. In addition to family news, some of these letters contain descriptions of local events and activities. Daniel pointed out one such letter that tells of a calamity that befell the Chaffeeville silk mill in 1860.

But first, a brief history of the Chaffeeville mill: About 1830 Joseph Conant, one of the partners in the Mansfield Silk Company in Gurleyville, built another small silk mill on the Fenton River about a mile downstream in the area now known as Chaffeeville. He named his new silk venture Conant and Company. The mill operated until 1839 when Joseph Conant moved to Northampton to serve as agent for the Northampton Silk Company. He was soon followed by his son-in-laws Orwell S. Chaffee and Earl Dwight Swift.

Following the demise of the Northampton Silk Company in 1840, Conant became involved with a group of radical abolitionists who formed the Northampton Association of Education and Industry. In 1842, the Association established a utopian community organized around a communally owned and operated silk mill. Members lived on the substantial mill property that had been purchased from the defunct Northampton Silk Company. Both the Conant and Swift families joined the Association but the short-lived communal experiment only lasted four years. (You can learn more about the Northampton Association in Christopher Clark's excellent book, *The Communitarian Moment: The Radical Challenge of the Northampton Association*.)

Meanwhile, Orwell S. Chaffee returned to Mansfield from Northampton in 1842. He began a new silk enterprise in the former Conant & Company mill. He ran a successful business there for close to two decades, gaining a reputation for the fine quality of his silk products. However disaster struck during the first week of September in 1860.

Robert P. Barrows described what happened in a letter written to his brother Lucius, dated September 12, 1860: "Mr. Chaffee's Silk factory was burned last week while nearly all hands were at Camp Meeting which [was] held about a mile south of Willimantic. His loss is supposed to be about twelve thousand

dollars. There were no persons in the factory at work that day. As to the Camp Meeting, the ground was well prepared a little west of the South Windham Road not quite halfway to South Windham. They had good preaching and most excellent order all of the week..."

An article of "Historical Reminiscences," published in the *Willimantic Chronicle* on October 18, 1882, provides some further details: "...the Chaffees suffered a great pecuniary loss by fire, which destroyed their mill, machinery and stock finished and unfinished. ...The origin of this fire still remains a mystery."

So what drew the mill workers to a camp meeting on that fateful day? It was likely a combination of both faith and curiosity. Although camp meetings had originated decades earlier, they were a new phenomenon in the Willimantic area.

Camp meetings were a major component of the evangelical movement known as the "Second Great Awakening" in the early 19th century. During this time, circuit preachers, such as the famous Lorenzo Dow of Coventry, traveled the country delivering sermons to large open-air assemblies. Camp meetings were especially common on the Western frontier where churches were few and far between. Itinerant preachers traveled from site to site and set up camp. Families would travel from miles around to attend their meetings, bringing their provisions with them. They would stay for days to listen to sermons, sing hymns, and take communion. The camp meetings offered not only religious inspiration, but a sense of community and a diversion from work.

The Willimantic Camp Meeting Association was founded in 1860 and was sponsored by the New London district of the Methodist Church. The Association initially purchased 11 acres located on the outskirts of Willimantic for its campground. The hilly site formed a natural amphitheater and it had several natural springs to provide water for the worshippers.

The Association's inaugural camp meeting was held on September 3, 1860 and extended through the week. Folks came from near and far, hauling their clothing, bedding, tents, and needed provisions with them. It was reported that the largest audience of the week reached between 4,000 and 5,000 people and that "the unusual degree of divine influence which attended all services, resulted in the conversion of 75 persons." Chaffee's mill workers were among the crowd, leaving the unattended mill to burn.

The disastrous mill fire that seemed to be the end of the Chaffee silk business, instead, became a new beginning and an opportunity to expand. In

1863 Orwell Chaffee joined with his son, Joseph Dwight, to form the company O. S. Chaffee & Son. They engaged Edwin Fitch to build a new and much larger mill on the original site. A larger dam was also constructed.

Business boomed and in 1872, the company expanded and opened a second mill in Willimantic. Ten years later, the *Willimantic Chronicle* reported, "The two mills in Chaffeeville and Willimantic are connected by telephone. They have in their employ over one hundred operatives, with a pay roll of some four thousand dollars monthly. The firm has an established and wide commercial reputation for honesty and fair dealing, they also have the confidence of the community in which they live and that of the public generally." From the ashes of that terrible fire in 1860, a stronger, more profitable business had grown.

Likewise, the Willimantic Camp Meeting Association also grew following its initial camp meeting in September 1860. As religious fervor swept the land during the Civil War and the post-war era, the popularity of the Association's annual camp meetings increased. At its peak, daily attendance grew to as many as 15,000 people who came from all over Connecticut. To meet the increased demand, the campgrounds were expanded from the original 11 acres to 35 acres. Wooden platforms were soon built to lift the tents off of the ground and these were later replaced by some 300 small cottages that offered better shelter.

The popularity of camp meetings faded after the first decades of the 20th century and many of the campgrounds have since disappeared. However the Willimantic Camp Meeting Association is still active today. It maintains an active summer program featuring weekly prayer meetings and Vespers services and it holds an annual Camp Meeting Week each July.



Some of the cottages today. The narrow buildings were known as "tent cottages."

The Association's campground still reflects the character of a bygone era. About a third of the original cottages have survived; many have become year-round residences. It is considered to be the oldest, continuously operating, campground of this type in America.



The O. S. Chaffee & Sons silk mill in Chaffeeville. The photograph shows the new mill and enlarged dam, both built following the 1860 fire.

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**REMEMBER: November 13 – MHS Meeting & Program by State Historian Walter Woodward
PLEASE RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP!**

**MANSFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY EXECUTIVE COUNCIL
2015-2016**

ELECTED OFFICERS:

President: Keith Wilson
Past President: John Meyers
Vice President: Anne Bennett
Secretary: Mary Feathers
Treasurer: Anne Greineder

Assistant Treasurer: Keith Johnson
Member-at-Large: Sharry Goldman
Member-at-Large: David Landry
Member-at-Large: Jamie Lang-Rodean
Member-at-Large: *Vacant*

COMMITTEE CHAIRS:

Programs: Bruce Clouette
Membership: Pam Roberts
Hospitality: *Vacant*
Research & Publications: Rudy Favretti
Newsletter: *Vacant*
Publicity: *Vacant*

Education: Carolyn Stearns
Old Houses: Donna Clouette
Museum: *Vacant*
Collection Management: Lisa Ferriere
Library: Richard Schimmelpfeng
Genealogy: Richard Roberts

EX-OFFICIO MEMBERS:

Ann Galonska (Museum Director)
Roberta Smith (Town Historian)