

River and Sound

Issue 5 Winter 2009

Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.
"The history of Old Lyme—the people of Old Lyme"



OLHSI tours and lectures, exhibits and publications: Old Lyme's unique history comes alive in 2008



*The 1938 hurricane exhibit at the
White Sands Community Center*

Photo: Olwen Logan/LymeLine.com



*John Pfeiffer leading a "Seafaring"
tour of Duck River Cemetery*

Photo: Bob Dunn

Dear Friends,

Less than four years after its establishment, the Old Lyme Historical Society has grown from a tiny core group to an association with more than 165 paying members. As our membership has expanded, so have the programs—tours, lectures, exhibits, and publications—we produce in an effort to preserve and analyze Old Lyme's social, economic, and political past. At the start of a new year, we are pleased to describe some highlights from 2008:

- Last February we continued our series of lively, engaging winter dinner lectures on the history of Old Lyme and its environs with a lecture and slide presentation, "Privateers on the Shoreline," by town historian John Pfeiffer.
- In May we obtained our own office, in the Genealogy Room at the Old Lyme–Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library. Open in the morning three days a week, the office has helped increase our visibility.
- In September we marked the 70th anniversary of the hurricane of 1938 by creating an exhibit attended by 800 people, hosting a reception, and publishing our third monograph —*The Hurricane of 1938: Old Lyme Remembers* (see page 2 of this newsletter).
- Also continuing in 2008 was our popular program of walking tours. In November Dr. Pfeiffer led "The Graves of Seafaring Old Lyme," at Duck River Cemetery (see pages 5–6).

None of these accomplishments would have been possible without the financial backing of the Town of Old Lyme, nor without the help of our supporters. We look forward to offering many more opportunities to explore and savor Old Lyme's rich history.

With best wishes for 2009,

Alison C. Mitchell
Chair, Old Lyme Historical Society

Recalling the 1938 hurricane



In the tunnel

Photo: Olwen Logan/
LymeLine.com

Three of our efforts last fall enabled longtime Old Lyme residents to re-experience—and younger generations to learn about—the 1938 hurricane.

A reception, held on September 21, the day the hurricane came ashore here, drew more than 250 attendees to the White Sands Community Center. An exhibit in late September– early October, also at the center, consisted of memorabilia from the 1930s, a tunnel with the images and sounds of southeastern Connecticut during the hurricane, and photographs of the resulting devastation. And we published *The Hurricane of 1938: Old Lyme Remembers*, featuring recollections of 25 Old Lyme residents who were here during the storm, as well as photos, letters, and newspaper articles.

Along with our first two books (*Poverty Island* and *This Ancient and Interesting Town*), the monograph is available for sale at The Turning Page bookstore. We are immensely grateful to:

- The White Sands Community Center for donating space for the reception and exhibit
- Essex Financial Services for underwriting the exhibit
- Dyanne Rafal for chairing the reception
- Tom Schellens for designing the exhibit, and Bob Dunn, John Flower, Helen Scott, and Muffie Whitley, and Jenn Hillhouse for implementing it
- Michele Dickey for researching and writing the monograph.



*Alison Mitchell and Tim Griswold
toasting each other with “Hurricanes”*

Photo: George Young

Did you know...?

(a recurring feature about an Old Lyme historical building or artifact)



Photo: c. 1925

Black Hall Store

This building, on the southwest corner of Bailey and Mile Creek roads in the Black Hall section of Old Lyme, was owned by Bertram DeWolf. It housed a post office and a store, where Dick Bugbee’s grandfather, a Mr. Bibby (who was born in England and retained a strong accent), was an employee. Mr. Bibby later worked at J.A. Roland General Store on Lyme Street, now the Cooley Gallery.

During the Depression a small apartment in the building was rented to the Kandy family. Art Hefflon, another tenant, who subsequently moved to the site of the present fish market on Route 156, managed a meat market downstairs.

The store was a hub of activity for the Daniels, Green, Weaver, Griffith, Noyes, Smith, Millard, Fafella, Bramble, and other large families. Many of their sons were drawn to a game room on the second floor, where they flouted the local taboo on playing pool. Eventually the noise became too much for the Chadwicks, who lived next door. In 1937 they bought the building and had it torn down by the Griffith family, who saved most of the material and used it to build a house on Whippoorwill Road. The site of the store remains an open lot.

Mr. DeWolf, who had asthma, died during the 1938 hurricane when the steep drop in air pressure impaired his breathing.

—Jim Noyes

OLHSI UPDATES

A vote for the past is a vote for the future!

Once again the OLHSI has been selected to participate in Essex Savings Bank's Community Investment Program. Through this program, the bank donates 10% of its after-tax net annual income to local nonprofit organizations and community development projects.



The polls are open until March 15. If you have an account with Essex Savings Bank, or know someone who has one, we urge all of you to cast a ballot for the OLHSI. This is one vote you can be sure will support your town!

At the office...

If you've visited the PGN Library recently, you may have noticed the OLHSI's newly installed showcase outside the Genealogy Room. In the first of a series of displays, we focus on Poverty Island, with artifacts dating mostly from the 1930s—bottles, tools, utensils, and footwear—along with shells and driftwood. Also featured are a map, plus illustrations by Catherine Christiano.

We thank Hank Golet, who collected the objects while prowling around Poverty Island, and Judy Whitney, who designed and executed the exhibit with assistance from Muffie Whitley and Jim Noyes.

A reminder!

It's time to renew your membership.

Please use the form on the back page of this newsletter. Thank you.

For potential donors

Thanks to an arrangement with Essex Financial Services, the OLHSI is now able to accept contributions in the form of stocks and bonds. To learn more about this service, please call Alison Mitchell at 860-434-0684.



Landsavers monograph planned for September



Scheduled for publication this year is the fourth in our series of monographs.

Landsavers of the

Lymes, a collaborative venture with the Florence Griswold Museum and the Lyme and Old Lyme Conservation Trusts, will explore American Impressionists' role in capturing Old Lyme's and Lyme's alluring way of life. It will also chronicle citizens' efforts over the past 45 years to preserve the two towns' natural beauty for future generations. The 64-page four-color book will be launched at a reception, hosted by the Florence Griswold Museum, on September 18.

John Pfeiffer to speak on slavery

This year's dinner lecture by town historian John Pfeiffer will be held on Friday, April 3, at 6:00 p.m. Dr. Pfeiffer's presentation, "Slavery in southeastern Connecticut: A view from the Lymes," will follow a dinner to be catered by Coffee's Country Market (regular or vegetarian; cost for each: \$30).

To make a reservation, please call the OLHSI office any time at 860-434-0686 and leave a message, or visit us during our office hours (10:00-noon, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday.) And please specify if you would like a vegetarian meal.

Want to get OLHSI news by e-mail?

Several OLHSI supporters have asked to be notified about forthcoming events by e-mail. To be added to the list, please contact us at olhsi@gmail.com and give us your e-mail address. Thanks!



The Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.

was established in 2005 to preserve and analyze the social, civic, economic, and political past of the Town of Old Lyme.

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Historian John Pfeiffer explores Old Lyme's maritime tradition

This past November, town historian John Pfeiffer led a walking tour at the Duck River Cemetery on the subject of the graves of seafaring Old Lyme. In the tour Dr. Pfeiffer drew on his paper, prepared for the OLHSI, "Old Lyme's Maritime Tradition," which discusses shipbuilding, ship captains, maritime trade, and maritime freedom. Some excerpts:

Old Lyme residents and the sea

Many of the early families of Lyme followed the English tradition of primogeniture—passing most property to the eldest male—meaning that younger brothers had to seek a livelihood elsewhere. Many of them opted to serve aboard ship, which not only offered an exciting life but also the possibility of great wealth. It was a highly respectable profession.

Old Lyme's families have had outstanding careers in the U.S. Navy and the Coast Guard. Men and women served their country on submarines, aircraft carriers and other warships, cutters, tenders, ice breakers, rescue craft, and support and supply vessels. We are home to naval and acoustical engineers, researchers, and shipyard technicians. People from Old Lyme also help the U.S. Coast Guard fulfill its five missions: maritime safety, security, and mobility; national defense (the Coast Guard is one of the five U.S. armed services); and protection of natural resources.

However, it is the merchant marine that probably has the longest and most colorful history for our townspeople. Without maritime trading, our forefathers would not have been able to survive the rigors of the new world, and we would not be here today.

The colonial period

The American colonies exported mainly raw materials, while England returned manufactured items. Under the policy of mercantilism, the colony was considered directly tied and subservient to its parent.

The colonies had one advantage: abundant forest resources. Over time the forest resource trade developed into increasingly more finished products. During the mid-17th century, logs were transported back to England and West Indies ports. However, because of the significant loss in slab, it was more cost effective to cut logs into processed planks, boards, and staves. To ensure better profits, the colonies developed sawmills, which produced

not only boards and planks but also precut timber, board, sheathing, and clapboard in the form of kits to assemble houses as well as ships. This marked the beginning of colonial industry and crosscut the foundation of mercantilism. Before long, local entrepreneurs started building their own ships, hauling their own cargo, and making their own profits.

Ships from Lyme were involved in the West Indies trade as early as 1650. This extremely lucrative business sent local agricultural goods—Indian corn, millet, peas, indigo, farm animals, and forest products—to ports in the Caribbean. On the return trip, ships brought sugar, molasses, and rum from the islands.

African slaves, brought to island auction blocks by English, Dutch, French, and Spanish ships, constituted a major part of the West Indies cargo. Southern New England captains would pick up slaves, leave some at markets in the U.S. South, take on bales of cotton, and return to their home ports. (This leg of the trip was referred to as the "coasting trade.") Much of the cotton was sent to England to be manufactured into cloth, while sugar and molasses went to local distilleries. Also sent to England was rum, which was redirected to Africa in exchange for slaves.

Old Lyme first became involved in this trade during the 17th century, when Captain Greenfield Larrabee exported wood and barrel staves as well as farm animals from Deming's Landing near the present Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts. An early enterprise was the William Sterling shipyard, which was built upstream along the western branch of the river that terminates just south of Saunders Hollow Road. Members of the Joseph Sill family were partners.

As the West Indies trade expanded, Lyme merchants William Ely, Joseph Peck, and Edward DeWolf transported hogshead and barrel staves there. William Ely (whose father, Richard Ely, had been a military captain in the army of Oliver Cromwell) was a slave owner in Lyme.

The 18th and 19th centuries

Old Lyme's landing, known as the Town Dock, was downstream from the Sterling shipyard and Deming's Landing. It was situated on the east bank of the Lieutenant River north of what is now Ferry Road and adjacent to Academy Lane. This relocation of maritime activity, corresponding to a mid-18th century focus on coastal and West Indies trade, featured ships, docks, bulkheads, and warehouses that were larger than in the upstream areas.

By the late 18th century, the area around the Town Landing had become the center of town. Building yards, while able to produce one or two vessels a year, focused mainly on repair and reworking. At this time Lyme's shipyard activities centered on the Edward and Samuel Hill and Reuben Champion yards.

The Town Landing came to represent the high point of local maritime activity. Among the investors who benefited hugely from privateering was John McCurdy—a partner with local merchants John Mather and Elisha Sheldon—who became the wealthiest “merchant” in the Connecticut colony.

Maritime activity, including the benefits of privateering, continued through the War of 1812. Merchant shipping, ship repair and refitting, and shipbuilding produced a population boom. During this time Old Lyme's population reached its peak of 4,300, a number not regained until the 1960s.

By 1820, local merchant shipping was quickly slipping away from the lower Connecticut River Valley and Lyme. As agrarian activity shifted west and south and local farming waned, so did the local forest industry. Agricultural and forest products were no longer competitive, and the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 placed New England produce at a great disadvantage. New York became the major East Coast port; nearly all merchant shipping either began or ended at the mouth of the Hudson River.

Even so, Old Lyme's maritime tradition does not end here. Two factors—the town's

sizable population in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and the tradition of primogeniture—prompted several young men from Old Lyme to begin seeking opportunities elsewhere, including merchant shipping ventures out of New York.

Among these were Nathaniel and George Griswold—the N.L. and G. Griswold Company (ultimately termed the “no loss and great gain company”)—who in 1794 launched a West Indies trade in molasses and rum. Under contract with Richard Hayden of Essex, they built a schooner, the *Black Prince*. In the 1820s they joined a company established by John L. Griswold to assemble a fleet of transatlantic merchant sailing vessels that

traveled between New York and London. In addition to freight, the ships carried immigrants and other passengers. The company comprised numerous Lyme captains, officers and crew. Lyme captains were Ezra Anderson, Thomas Anderson,

Josiah Burnham, John Mather Chadwick, Daniel Chadwick, Charles Chadwick, Walter Chadwick, Henry Champlin, Arthur Champion, Edmund Champion, August H. Griswold, Robert Griswold, Josiah Lord, George Moore, Richard Moore, Elisha Ely Morgan, Walter Morgan, William B. Smith, Dan Lee Stark, Edward G. Tinker, and Selden C. Warner. Serving on other companies as captains and crew from Lyme were David Caulkins, Seth Chadwick, William H. Johnson, and Josiah Lord.

In 1839 the company entered the China tea trade. Subsequently they contracted a New York yard to build the largest clipper, *Challenge*. As a marketing ploy, George Griswold made Robert Waterman, the era's most newsworthy sea captain, an offer to break the record in sailing to California. In 1851 the *Challenge* met with bad weather, and it took several weeks to round Cape Horn. During the trip Waterman faced a mutiny, and on arriving in San Francisco was greeted with a court inquest regarding his inhumane treatment of nine members of the crew. □

The town's sizable population in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and the tradition of primogeniture prompted several young men from Old Lyme to seek opportunities elsewhere, including merchant shipping ventures out of New York.

Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.
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Membership fees and other donations are fully tax-deductible.*

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