



NEWSLETTER

WESTPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Keeping Westport's History Alive

February, 2004

“This Old Westport House” - Not to be Missed! by Mollie Donovan



Commissioned by Bessie Jennings and painted by Becky Boyer Merrilees, this watercolor of Allen's Clam House is one of seven paintings on loan from the Grace and Frank Penny Collection.

This Old Westport House, our second exhibit in the new Betty and Ralph Sheffer Hall, opens February 1. Advocating the preservation of our antique housing stock, it provides an excellent background for *Old House School*, an educational series of nine lectures and panels created by Hilary Stevens, WHS member, historic house specialist and realtor. Ms. Stevens has coordinated the workshops to provide

information and resources to home owners by recognized guest speakers from a diverse range of disciplines.

WHS has long been an advocate of preservation, and the exhibit and accompanying lectures should inspire community members to cherish and preserve our town's historic streetscapes.

The Society's headquarters at Wheeler House, a building on the National Register of Historic Places, is a perfect example of how a building can be modified or "recycled" for a new use without losing its historic identity. The recently added Westport History Center wing was designed to enhance the original building and to echo the lines of our unusual octagonal cobblestone Bradley-Wheeler Barn.

The Society serves as the caretaker of

Adams Academy, at 15 Morningside Drive North, a landmark property. The town-owned, one-room school house is used as part of the Society's youth education program.

In the past, the Society has been involved with the formation of the Kings Highway and Jesup Road Historic Districts, and the listing of the National Hall area on the National Register of Historic Places. We work closely with the Westport Historic District Commission to prevent demolition of antique housing whenever possible.

The Society's ever-growing archives, open to the public, contain information and photographs of Westport's early homesteads. A House History booklet to help authenticate the building date and the original and subsequent owners of antique homes is available. When the research is completed (with help, if needed, from the House History Chairman), a plaque with the name of the original owner and the building date is available through the Society.

— continued on Page 2

What's Inside:

- "Old House School" Series P. 3
- The First Staples High School P. 4
- "Art Smarts" at WHS P. 5
- "Get Resourceful" P. 5
- "Fun with Façades" for Scouts P. 5
- "All-America City" P. 6
- Rave Reviews for Westport Shoes P. 7
- Veterans Green and the Doughboy P. 7
- Turn Your Home into a Watercolor P. 8



Speaking of Amazing Old Westport Houses . . .

For Families and Children —
Don't miss an opportunity to explore a truly unique and full-of-surprises Westport Mansion!

— See Page 5

WHS NEWSLETTER

President **Associate Director**
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Imagination Unlimited

“This Old Westport House” — *continued*

Memorabilia, such as tools similar to those used in building early Westport homes, from the David S. Arms Collection, photographs by Thomas O'Connor Sloane from Westport's 1930s WPA project, and paintings from our archives and the Westport Schools Permanent Art Collection will be on exhibit. The Westport Historic District Commission, William Scheffler, Nancy Coley and other owners of antique homes have contributed photographs of homes as they looked originally and as they have been remodeled and restored.

We are also honored to present a painting collection on loan from Grace and Frank Penny, who are related to Bessie Jennings, the originator of Westport's Jennings Trail. Grace has included a history of when and why paintings in the collection were commissioned. Her reminiscences about Bessie Jennings and her family are a special addition to the exhibit.

If you are a lover of old houses or want to decorate a new home in a traditional style - don't miss this exhibit and the lecture and panel series.



Message from the President

*A Challenging Era — for our Past, for our Present
 — and for our Future.*

I would like to thank our outgoing President,

Wally Woods, for leading the Westport Historical Society through such an unusual and difficult year. Also many thanks to John Lupton, who served as our Executive Director for the past year, and to Roy Dickinson, our project manager for the construction. Keeping the many aspects of this multi-phased project on track, despite all of the rain and the mud, Roy received our WHS Volunteer of the Year Award.

As we go into 2004, we find ourselves in a very challenging time. For the first time in our history, we have debt in the form of a line of credit. While we have a wonderful new building with expanded archive space and exhibit halls, it will cost more to maintain this building and require more volunteers to help —

not just during exhibits and special programs, but on a day-to-day basis.

As President of the Board, I pledge to put my efforts into managing our finances in the best way possible, and to work toward developing broader fund-raising capabilities.

We need *all of you*, our Board of Directors, our Directors-at-Large, our longtime members and our many, many new members — to get more involved than ever before at this time of our greatest potential growth!

With our fantastic facility, we have an opportunity to become a top class Westport History Center. To do this we need your help, your time, your creative ideas, your energy and, above all, your commitment. After that, we have nowhere to go but up!

I look forward to serving as your President during this challenging era — for our past, for our present — and for our future.

— *Joni Andrews*

“This Old Westport House” — Special Thanks:

To our Lecture and Panel Sponsors — **Wild Oats Natural Market Place, David Preusch, architect, and PLI Brokerage.**

To Grace and Frank Penny for loan of painting collection; Westport Schools Permanent Art Collection; William Scheffler, postcards; all Panel and Lecture participants; members of the Westport Historic District Commission; Gregory's Sawmill, Wilton Center, and to Highgrove Landscapes.

“This Old Westport House”

Exhibit Committee:

Katie Otey and Peter Jennings, **Exhibit Curators**; Mollie Donovan and Wally Woods, **Exhibit Co-Chairmen**; Andrea Cross, Howard Munce, Barbara Raymond, Mindy Mooney, Nancy Cash, Hilary Stevens, Carol Young and Andrea Fine.



(Above) *Some of the antique tools that will be on display through May 16, 2004*

“Old House School” Lectures and Panels

Saturdays • 11 am to 12:30 pm

The Betty and Ralph Sheffer Hall at Westport Historical Society, 25 Avery Place, Westport, CT

The programs are open to members of the general public with an interest in preserving traditional design, and those wishing to decorate newly constructed homes in a traditional style.

Saturday, January 31, 2004: **The Impact of Westport’s Agricultural and Maritime History on Home Style and Design**

Speaker: James Sexton, PhD, consultant, writer, Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation.

Saturday, February 7, 2004: **Nuts & Bolts of Old House Ownership**

Panel Leader: Hilary Stevens. **Speakers:** Home Inspections: Peter Seirup, principal, Home Directions; Insurance: Sandra Bravo, SVP Business Development, PLI Brokerage; Financing: John Grosso, American Mortgage Services; Legal/Tax: Brad Aron, Esquire.

Saturday, February 28, 2004: **What to Expect When Renovating Your Old House**

Speakers: Homeowner: Debby Angotti; Restoration: Chris Wuerth, principal, Christopher Wuerth Restoration Contractor; Historic District Commission: Barlow Cutler-Wotton.

Saturday, March 6, 2004: **Caring for the Exterior of Your Old House**

Panel Leader: David Preusch, architect, antique specialist. **Speakers:** Roof: Craig Schultz, principal, C.R. Schultz Associates; Siding: Michael Hesling, principal, Tectonics, Inc.; Shutters/Windows: David Preusch; Painting: Ben Taing, president, Industrial Painting Corp.; Masonry/Chimney: TBA.



Saturday, March 20, 2004: **The Mechanicals of Your Old House**

Panel Leader: David Preusch, architect, antique specialist. **Speakers:** Plumbing: Peter Kunkel, principal, Forger-Kunkel Plumbing; Heating and Cooling: Andy Morin, principal, Cannondale Heating and Air Conditioning; Electrical: Ray Berry, president, Yankee Electric Construction Company; Lighting: Amy Vitale, ALV Lighting Solutions.

Saturday, April 3, 2004: **The Interior of Your Old House**

Panel Leader: David Preusch, architect, antique specialist. **Speakers:** Woodwork: Michael D. Kaesmann, principal, Michael D. Kaesmann Builder and Ken Marti, Brookside Cabinets & Millwork; Painting: Ben Taing, president, Industrial Painting Corp.

Saturday, April 10, 2004: **21st Century Detective Work: Assessing & Researching Your Old House**

Panel Leader: Hilary Stevens. **Speakers:** Research: Cheryl Bliss, archivist, Westport Historical Society and David Press, author; Assessment: representative from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Saturday, May 1, 2004: **Interior Design for Period Homes**

Speaker: Richard Hershner, principal, Historic Design Associates.

Saturday, May 15, 2004: **Landscape for Period Styles**

Speaker: Sheila Wertheimer, principal, Wertheimer & Associates.

“This Old Westport House” educational series of lectures and panel discussions was created by Hilary Stevens, a WHS member and an historic home specialist in the Westport office of William Raveis Real Estate & Home Services.

TICKET INFORMATION

WHS Members:

\$10 per lecture • \$75 series

Non-members:

\$15 per lecture • \$100 series.

To order tickets, please call 203-222-1424, or visit our website at www.westporthistory.org to print out a ticket form.

For further information, email houseschool@westporthistory.org

This Old Westport School House - The First Staples by Dan Woog

Only 60 students enrolled that first year, and the first graduating class consisted of six girls.



“This painting was made in my house on Riverside Avenue across the street from the school. From my window I had a perfect view of the building with binoculars — kept on the windowsill to study ducks and swans — I could see the details of the brick work. It was made a few months before the building was torn down.”

D. Hutchison (Westport artist)

Recent visitors to Staples High School are marveling at the construction of a new three-story building, rising in front of today’s low-slung North Avenue campus. Many residents remember the 1978-81 renovation project, which connected nine separate wings into one unified school. Some Westporters recall the school’s first incarnation, in 1958. The modern California architecture looked lovely, but navigating outside in the snow and rain of a New England school year was daunting.

A dwindling number of residents attended Staples on Riverside Avenue, in the building now called Saugatuck Elementary School. But only a few Westporters remember the original red-brick building, located where the

Doubleday tennis courts are now. Rarer still is the man or woman who attended school there.

The Original Cornerstone

The cornerstone for the original Staples High School was laid in 1884, and for over five decades it served the town well. The “new” Staples – the center portion of what is now is Saugatuck El, without the auditorium or gymnasium wings – was opened in 1938.

Horace Staples – the businessman and bank president who used his personal fortune to establish the high school – was 82 years old when it opened. His new building was not yet completed, so the first classes were conducted in National Hall, the Saugatuck River complex he also owned.

The laying of the cornerstone on April 24, 1884 was an impressive affair. All businesses closed, and the town turned out in force. Sirens, bells and whistles sounded; speeches were made, and the Rev. J.R. Williams declared the school would be “an ornament to our village, an honor to its founder, and by God’s blessing, a source of greater, more varied and more lasting benefit to all the people of this town than the wit of man or pen of mine can portray.”

The First Staples

The building was soon ready. The first floor contained one high school

classroom and one for the grammar school, plus a library and laboratory. The second floor held two classes, and an assembly hall seating 350. Horace Staples thought big: Only 60 students enrolled that first year, and the first graduating class consisted of six girls.

The building was heated by stoves and furnaces. In 1886 water was furnished to both floors. The first-floor library consisted of 250 volumes of fiction, along with various magazines, newspapers and pamphlets. Use was free for students; others paid an annual fee of \$1, or a life membership of \$10.

By 1915 the school population was large enough that “modernization” discussions began. It took another two decades, however, until that new Staples actually opened, and a few years after that before the original building was phased out. It fell into disuse, then gradually decayed. In September 1967, construction was underway on the auditorium wing of what was by then Bedford Junior High School. Horace Staples’ dream fell to the wreckers’ ball.

Westport author and Staples graduate Dan Woog is writing a history of Staples High School. It will be published next year.



“The modern California architecture looked lovely, but . . .”

Staples High School 1990

KIDS AND FAMILY FUN AT WHS



A Magical Museum for One and All! THE SCHLAET ESTATE

Behind a hidden sliding panel lies a small secret room, and in the basement— a full length wooden bowling alley! Can you find the dumbwaiter? The elevator shaft? An old stone wall window which gives a glimpse at a “secret garden”? Enjoy the privilege of spending an hour “exploring” this historic early 1900s home which overlooks Long Island Sound.

Sunday, March 21 OR Sunday, April 4 at 1:00 pm

**For reservations (limited) and directions
please call Carol Young at 227-6396.**

**Adults: \$10.00
Children: \$5.00**

Get Resourceful



*What does one do with a
“Connecticut potato”?*

On March 13, WHS will present hands-on workshops about Westport’s early settlers and their use of natural resources for 2nd and 3rd graders for the “Minds in Motion” program at BMS. For more information, call Marge Manoff at 203-856-2753.

On March 13, WHS will present hands-on workshops about Westport’s early settlers and their use of

Fun with Façades

Scouts can earn badges at WHS!

Scouts are invited to work toward their Architecture Badge as they enjoy our “This Old Westport House” exhibit, a short downtown walking tour, and then create their own architectural designs. Please



call Youth Education Coordinator Carol Young at 227-6396 for further information.

“Art Smarts” Kindergartners Visit TV Land at WHS



Five and six-year-olds could barely believe the tiny size of one of the vintage TVs which was on display in the new gallery.

Arranged by “Art Smarts” coordinator Frances Watts Rogers for Greens Farms School kindergarten children, twenty-one youngsters visited WHS to learn about photographs as well as participate in a “museum” experience about old-fashioned televisions and Westport and Weston’s TV personalities.

This spring the children will be photographing each other— striking “attitudes” and posing with props for their own school “museum” display.

Many thanks to kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Barnes and all of the

NEW MEMBERS

Lynn Jeffery
Thomas & Elaine Long
John L. Shaw
David B. De Wetter
Allen & Sylna Levy
Richard & Robyn Crain
Lee Walther
Nahid Westwood
Margeaux Johansson
Lisa C. Canosa
Marion Palcsik
Sabra Gallo & Fred Post
Catherine & Jerry Amon
George Judd
Kathleen Banta
Harriet & Paul Sheldon
Jamie & Elaine McCleary
Ron & Grace Kehle
Mr & Mrs John Belpedio
Thanne & Robert Tangel
Leslie D. Marantz
Lorraine Harrison
Jane Mills
Frances Ferrara
Michelle Burnham
Raynor Cunningham
Vivian M. Dye
Robert & JoAnn Davidson
Jennifer Pressman
Jane Green
Ronnie Riker
— as of November 30, 2003



Kindergartners were intrigued by the magnifying device for viewing tinyTV screens.

volunteer parents from GFS who helped make this such a memorable “hands-off/hands-on” experience!

When Westport Was Named an “All-America City” by Woody Klein

January 22, 1959 — One of our town’s proudest moments, a time to remember!



“All American” is usually a term reserved for athletes—icons of the world of college football—who have performed superbly on the playing fields. Yet, there is a notable exception. In one of our town’s proudest moments, Westport, Connecticut in 1958 was named an “All-America City.” On January 22, 1959, the headline in big type on *The Westporter-Herald* read: ‘Westport All-America City For Intelligent Citizen Action In 1958.’ The article began:

“Westport, long celebrated as the happy home of artists, writers, and Madison Avenue communicators, and more recently sensationalized as the locale of a litter of novels featuring martinis, marital tangles, and other exurban pastimes, has been named one of eleven ‘All-America Cities’ honored for ‘progress achieved through intelligent citizen action’ during 1958. The coveted award was announced today by the National Municipal League and *Look Magazine*, co-sponsors of the competition.

“Much as an Iowa quarterback awaits the Grantland Rice All-America selections for the gridiron, so did Westporters who knew that Westport was one of the finalist cities to qualify while the board of judges, headed by Dr. George Gallup, picked the first team from the list of 100 entries. This year,

for the first time in the nine-year history of this national contest, two Connecticut cities broke into the charmed backfield. Both Westport and New Haven were chosen as two of America’s eleven most far-sighted and progressive communities.”

Citizen Action in Problem Solving

Westport’s population had increased from 11,300 to 17,000 as a result of migration of New Yorkers in the decade from 1948 to 1958. Westport was cited by the jury of 12, led by Dr. Gallup, for “successful citizen action in solving problems stemming from a rapid population growth, and outmoded city government, and inadequate city services.” A crowd of Westporters watched with pride as town officials, led by First Selectman Herb Baldwin, hoisted its banner atop the municipal flagpole in Parker Harding Plaza proclaiming Westport an “All-America City” during a brief ceremony in February, 1959. The town was flooded with posters, bumper stickers, flags, and other memorabilia for the occasion.

Six Areas of Competition

Honoring the historic event, *The Town Crier* published a special edition on February 26, 1959, telling the full story of how Westport won the coveted award. The six areas of competition for all towns were government structure, rational land use, tax reform, education, refuse disposal and a professional police organization. President Dwight D. Eisenhower issued an extraordinary statement of praise: “I am delighted Westport has received one of the All-America City awards. The award brings new honor to your community and recognizes those

standards of citizenship which make our country strong.” Connecticut Senator Thomas J. Dodd, Governor Abraham A. Ribicoff, former Governor John Davis Lodge (a Westport resident), and Congressman Donald J. Irwin of the Fourth Congressional District all attended this landmark event.

Continued Dedication of the Community

The last page of the official program carried this message: “The Job Ahead: The All-America City Award is given for significant progress in civic affairs—not for achieving the ultimate in good government. To have real significance, an All-America City Award should mark the beginning of greater citizen participation in local civic affairs. There is still much to do. Westport has not finished its job.... It is only through the constant vigilance and the continued dedication of all the members of our community that we can become, in fact, what we have already been called...an “All-America City.”

The Town Crier’s editorial commending the townspeople ended with this analogy to football: “Knowing Westport as we do, we have a hunch that it will stay on the first team of civic progress as long as have old pros like Sammy Baugh and Frank Gifford persisted in the top ranks of professional football.”

Our town has, indeed, fielded a first team worthy of an All-America designation every year since that special occasion 46 years ago—a time to remember.

Woody Klein is the author of “Westport, Connecticut, The Story of a New England Town’s Rise To Prominence,” sponsored by the Westport Historical Society, published in 2000.

Come Enjoy our New “Remarkable Book and Gift Shop”

Old Westport House? New Westport House? — No Matter!

Beyond the many unusual items that celebrate the history of our town — from antique toys and games, posters and books, unique frames, and unusual memorabilia — you will get to meet Andrea Maritzer Fine, our longtime gift shop manager, well-known Westport photographer, and Westport Historical Society’s talented graphic artist.

Bring in a colorful photograph of your Westport home and find out what miracles can happen when Andrea puts her creative photographic talents into turning your home into an artistic masterpiece!



Why not turn an ordinary photograph of your home into a fabulous watercolor rendering?



WHS GIFT SHOP

DAYS AND HOURS

Tuesday-Friday

10 am to 4 pm

Saturday

12 Noon to 3 pm

~ **CLOSED** ~

Sundays & Mondays

SAVE THE DATE

**2004 SPRING
GARDEN TOUR**

~ **June 6** ~



Westport Historical Society

KEEPING WESTPORT'S HISTORY ALIVE

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www.westporthistory.org

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