River, Land, and Sea: Wethersfield’s Maritime History

Currently on view in the Wethersfield Museum’s Watson Gallery, River, Land, and Sea: Wethersfield’s Maritime History lends itself to a wide variety of complementary programming, both historical and cultural. Throughout 2022, the society is presenting a series of programs designed to give attendees a more complete understanding of the crucial role Wethersfield’s maritime trade played in the town’s development and a better appreciation of the culture of the times. Scheduled for Tuesday evenings at 7:00 pm, the series opens in 2022 on January 11 with WHS Research Librarian Martha Smart speaking in the Keeney Ballroom on “The River, The Sound, and The Sea.” Ms. Smart will speak on Wethersfield’s role in the competition for the trade of Long Island Sound among Europeans and Native Americans; the West Indies trade and its basis in slavery; and the evolution of trade into the 19th Century. Prior to Ms. Smart’s lecture, there will be a “members-only” event at 5:30 pm. Bring your own sandwich and the society will provide the soup. Admission is free, but members will need to RSVP by January 10 to reserve a place. Walk-ins will not be admitted. Reserve your space by emailing the WHS office at society@wethersfieldhistory.org or call (860) 529-7656, Tuesday – Friday, 10:00 am to 4:00 pm.

On January 18, the series continues with author and Rocky Hill Town Historian Robert Herron in the Rotary Room speaking on Maritime Rocky Hill. Future speakers include Akeia de Barros Gomes, Senior Curator of Social Maritime Histories of the Mystic Seaport Museum speaking about Black seamen on February 8 and Chris Menapace, Senior Educator at Discovering Amistad on February 22. March 22 brings a concert of sea chanteys and nautically themed music given by WHS favorites, The Jolly Beggars Native artist, educator, and performer Jonathan James-Perry will speak about native seamen on March 29. All programming is scheduled on Tuesday evenings at 7:00 pm and will be listed in future editions of the Almanac, the society’s website (www.wethersfieldhistory.org), and social media. All lectures and concerts will be given in the Keeney Memorial Cultural Center, 200 Main Street, Wethersfield, CT. Admission is free for WHS members and $10.00 for the general public. Ample free parking is available in the lot behind the Keeney Center.

This programming has been made possible in part by grants from CT Humanities and the Robert Alan Keeney Memorial Fund at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving.

Old Wethersfield Arts and Crafts Fair 40th Anniversary

“You can take a closer look at all these buildings tomorrow when Comstock, Ferre is holding its first annual Craft Fair from 9:30 am to 4:30 pm (in case of rain, the Fair will be held on Sunday). There will be 30 juried exhibitors, as well as craft demonstrations, strolling musicians, and food…”


It’s hard to believe, but 2022 marks the 40th Anniversary of the Old Wethersfield Arts and Crafts Fair. From its humble beginnings in 1982 as a private commercial endeavor by Comstock, Continued on page 3
FORECAST

90 Years of Preservation, Education, and Community

Our society was founded by community members at the Center School (now the Keeney Center) on February 4, 1932 – 90 years ago. “All residents of the town interested in historical matters pertaining to Wethersfield” were invited to join. That invitation is still current today – but you don’t need to be a Wethersfield resident, just be interested in its history!

The society was formed to plan a celebration of Wethersfield’s 300th Birthday in 1934, but since then, our mission “to preserve and promote Wethersfield’s history and culture to inspire people today and tomorrow” has continued. We have amassed a collection of Wethersfield-related objects and an impressive archival collection. We have created and we maintain three fine museums and a research library and we regularly present award winning exhibitions and educational programs for children and adults, all within the scope of that mission. We have always been a community based organization, and all the things that the society has accomplished over the past 90 years came to fruition because community members made them happen.

If Wethersfield Historical Society is going to continue to be the guardian and advocate of all of our community’s heritage, present new and fresh exhibits and programming, and celebrate the history that happens every day, we need your continued support, as well as the support of new members and volunteers. Many hands make light work, and our membership and volunteer base needs to be continually renewed with new supporters joining our long-time members. This winter and spring, invite a friend who may not know about the society to one of our events, and encourage them to become members, to volunteer, and to support the society. Our members are our most effective advocates!

The staff and I look forward to greeting all of our members, old and new at our 2022 events. As it was when we were founded in 1932 and still is today, you, our members, are what makes Wethersfield Historical Society such a special, relevant, and successful organization.

With warm regards,

Amy

WETHERSFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The ALMANAC is a publication of Wethersfield Historical Society, a 501(c)3, non-profit organization chartered in 1932.

Wethersfield Historical Society: Preserving and promoting Wethersfield’s history and culture to inspire people today and tomorrow.

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In 1782, a free Black woman named Abigail Samson was baptized in Wethersfield’s First Church. Since Abigail Samson’s father, Richard, had died at a relatively young age, her grandmother, Lettuce (ca. 1729-1800), would have accompanied her on this special occasion. In the years to come, Abigail Samson would probably have spent many Sundays in the back of First Church, where African Americans were required to sit. Then, something went wrong. Between July 25, 1797 and January 8, 1799, Abigail Samson was repeatedly visited by prominent poet and physician Lemuel Hopkins (1750-1801). During these visits, Lemuel Hopkins provided Abigail Samson with medicine. Why did Abigail Samson need a doctor? What type of medicine did Lemuel Hopkins supply? Did this medicine cure her or make her feel worse? There is so much more we would love to know about Abigail Samson’s life, but there is only so much that written records can tell us.

Too often, the stories of Wethersfield’s Black residents, like Abigail Samson, have been lost or forgotten. Wethersfield Historical Society (WHS) is committed to bringing these stories out of the shadows. With the assistance of research librarian Martha Smart and researcher Diane Cameron, WHS will create a database that will share biographical data pertaining to Abigail Samson and over 400 other free and enslaved African Americans and Native Americans who lived in Wethersfield between 1634 and 1848.

Martha and Diane have spent decades recovering the stories of Wethersfield’s peoples of color. When Martha began volunteering at WHS in the 1970’s, she was told that slavery in Wethersfield was very limited: “Maybe there was a house servant or two, but that was it.” Having grown up in Michigan where she learned about the history of slavery in the North, Martha knew that slavery in Wethersfield must have been far more extensive. She began digging through WHS’ collection of account books, church records, and other records, carefully noting on index cards any information she found relating to African Americans and Native Americans.

Meanwhile, Diane, who worked at the Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum (WDS), had begun her own investigation into the lives of African Americans in Wethersfield. For too long, WDS had ignored the stories of the enslaved people who lived in the Deane House when sharing the house’s history with the public. Diane strove to replace this outdated approach with a new, more inclusive narrative that recognized the contributions of African Americans to Wethersfield’s history. In addition to transforming WDS’ approach to Black history, Diane published several scholarly articles, including “Enslavement, Freedom, Possibility, and Poverty: Four Generations of Quash Gomer’s Family in Connecticut, 1748-1864” and “Circumstances of Their Lives: Enslaved and Free Women of Color, Wethersfield, Connecticut, 1648-1832.”

Discovering the stories of Wethersfield’s peoples of color required dedication, patience, diligence, and ingenuity. Martha and Diane had to travel to archives all around Connecticut and comb through old documents rife with antiquated spelling and at times practically illegible handwriting for any scraps of information these documents might reveal about Wethersfield’s peoples of color. Over the coming months, WHS staff members will digitize Martha’s and Diane’s findings in a new database that will appear on WHS’ website. Future newsletter articles will keep you posted on this exciting project.

Crafts Fair 40th Anniversary continued from page 1

Ferre and Company held on their own grounds, to partnering with the Wethersfield Historical Society in 1991 and the move to Cove Park, to its current incarnation as a fundraiser for and managed by the non-profit Wethersfield Historical Society itself, “Craft Fair” has always been one of the town’s most popular annual events. This past year featured 80 juried vendors and exhibitors, many of whom have been returning for years and cite the event as one of their favorites. Preparations are already underway to make this year’s installment one of the most memorable ever. Save Saturday, October 1, 2022 from 10:00am to 4:00pm, come to Cove Park, have a great time, and be a part of history.
A Brief Look Back at 2021

By any measure, 2021 was a busy and dynamic one for Wethersfield Historical Society. Despite being closed to the public for almost half of the year, WHS managed to reopen and host several successful events, beginning with Heritage Weekend in May and closing with our Volunteer Holiday Party in December. It wasn’t all sunshine and roses as the weather didn’t always cooperate (Heritage Weekend took place indoors, The Tricky Bits lost their second set to rain in July’s Keeney Koolers, and the second performance of Old Wethersfield Lantern Light Tours was rained out), but WHS persevered and re-emerged optimistic and undaunted. We are all looking forward to better days ahead and look back with pride at how well our organization (Governing Board, membership, staff and volunteers) coped with difficult circumstances.

Keeney Koolers July 2021

Number 9 performs for an appreciative Keeney Koolers audience.

Joan & Mike Munroe and the Keeney Koolers audience enjoy Number 9.
Old Wethersfield Arts & Crafts Fair October 2, 2021

Times Fool Theatre Company
August 18, 2021

Times Fool Theatre Company’s outdoor production of Romeo & Juliet
Photo by Ben Jordan

Gate 2 welcomes arriving visitors to Craft Fair.

WHS Bake Sale Table at Craft Fair (Left to right) Roberta Simpson, Jaydalize London, and Joan Munroe.
Brighid Dougherty as Elizabeth Fosdick Buckley.

WHS volunteer, Andrea Velez with cast member Gene Coppa as Moses Tryon.

Porch Fest August 28, 2021

(Left to Right) Society members Cindy Brown, Carol Bruce, and Bookkeeper Mary Procyk greet Porchfest visitors.

The Jolly Beggars and their audience at Porchfest 2021.
Holiday Volunteer Party December 8, 2021

Architectural Photographer Peter Brown and WHS member Lee Kuckro decked out for the holidays.

WHS Volunteer Phyllis Battisti waves to the camera.

Volunteers Cindy Brown, Shirley Fulton, and WHS Board President Elaine St. Onge.
WHS welcomes these new members:

Viola Day Mullin, Holly Maynard and Bob Byron, John and Cheryl Roth, Carol Raymond Skelcher, Kevin Timbro, and Lisa Wurzer

**CALENDAR of EVENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
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