

River & Sound

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

1st Quarter 2024 • Winter Issue #46

Lyme Tea Party –250 Years Ago

On March 16, 1774 the Sons of Liberty in Lyme, CT did their part to enforce America's refusal to allow the sale of taxable East India Company tea. Though it was neither the first nor the most famous such action, a commemoration of it some 30 years later may have been the first use in print of the term "Tea Party" to describe such events.

The Seven Years' War (1756-1763) was a major victory for the British Empire and its allies over the empires of France and Spain. Britain secured all of North America east of the Mississippi River, effectively ending French threats to her seaboard colonies, but at the cost of massive debt. For the first time since the abortive efforts of James II, Britain attempted to enforce her absolute rule over her American Colonies, regularizing customs collections and imposing taxes, direct and indirect, to defray the massive debt. It did not go well.

Once again, Americans cited Magna Carta and refused to pay taxes without representation in Parliament. A series of taxes of various kinds were imposed. They were met by demonstrations, petitions, and an increasingly militant and well-organized opposition. Boycotts of taxed British goods caused Parliament to rescind most of the taxes, but it kept the one on tea, just to demonstrate that it still had the right to "bind the colonies in all matters whatsoever."

Americans, particularly in New England, loved their tea, much as we do coffee today. At first, the remaining tea tax caused the Americans no moral dilemma, for the very good reason that nearly 90% of the tea consumed in the colonies was lower-cost Dutch tea supplied by smugglers. No 'unfair' tax paid; no issue. Enjoy your tea!

The Seven Years' War was fought on every continent touched by Europeans. The British had won handsomely in India, but their East India Company (EIC) faced a serious market slump in the aftermath. Hundreds of tons of China tea remained unsold in its London warehouses.

Parliament devised a way to aid the EIC while making a key point in their ongoing argument with the Americans. They altered the trade laws to allow the EIC to ship tea direct to the colonies, refunded their 25% home import tax, and reduced the colonial tax on tea by half from 6d/pound to 3d/pound. They would flood the market with cheap, legal, taxed tea and test Americans' resolve.

From the beginning, a huge percentage of American merchants were involved one way or another in evading the onerous Imperial trade laws, a.k.a. in "smuggling." This plan was a direct blow to their business interests. For the



Reenacting Lexington's Tea Party' of 1773. Lexington Historical Society

general public, however, it forced them to ignore their material interests (not buy cheap tea) in order to stick to their moral principles (no taxation without...). Choosing principles over material advantage is always surprisingly difficult, as anyone who has done so (or failed to do so) can tell you. The Sons of Liberty and their allies were alarmed at the prospect of such a test, and decided their only hope

was to prevent the tea from entering the market.

In late fall of 1773 seven ships set out with EIC tea for American ports: one each to Charleston, Philadelphia, and New York; and four for Boston. The first three managed to get the ships to return without landing their cargoes (or incurring the hated tax). Thomas Hutchinson, Royal Governor of Massachusetts, insisted that the ships in Boston would land their cargoes and pay the tax.

Three made it into Boston Harbor, but the fourth was run ashore in a gale near Truro on Cape Cod. Samuel Adams sent urgent messages to the Cape to burn the tea at all hazards, but the buyer's son got there in time to transfer the cargo to Castle William in Boston Harbor. Two chests he consigned to a man on the Cape, one of which was recovered by local Patriots and destroyed. The other, apparently, went roving.

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The mission of the Old Lyme Historical Society, Incorporated, is to collect, preserve, interpret and promote the rich history of Old Lyme, Connecticut and its environs for the benefit of residents and visitors.

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From the Chair ...

Dear Members,

In February of 2014 the Historical Society purchased the former Grange Hall. Having a permanent home for the Society and its Archives was a major step forward. It was made possible by the generous support of over two hundred local residents and businesses, as well as a gift of \$5,000 from the Town. Our then Co-Chair of the Board of Trustees, Mark Lander, recounts the events in this issue. On this tenth anniversary, and on behalf of the whole membership of the Old Lyme Historical Society, I would like to thank all who contributed, and to call out a few of them by name:

Roger Breunig, Jane Cable, Tim Griswold, Jennifer Hillhouse, Dyanne Rafal, Adela Wilmerding, Jim Noyes, Max Belding, Eugenie Copp, Mary Dangremond, Jim Graybill, Mary Janvrin, Don & Susan Joffray, Judges Farm, the Town of Old Lyme, the Big Y, and Daniel Woodhead.

To these, and to all who have contributed to the Society's work over the years: **Thank You!**

Our Oral History interviews continue apace. We are still looking for people who would like to conduct interviews, and for subjects you think should be interviewed about their experience of Old Lyme, preserving our local history for future generations.

This spring we begin our lecture series with a look at **DNA matches in genealogical research**. We have seen some remarkable results from this approach among our own members, as you will hear at Cheryl Poirier's presentation at **55 Lyme Street, March 21 at 7:00 pm**. Also in March, Dawn McCarthy is working on a program about bridge building for the local Scouts. Lectures for April and May are in the works, so check our web site for details.

Our **June Hydrangea Sale** last year was a great success. Through the generosity of the Comstock family of Old Lyme, we are reprising it at **55 Lyme Street** this summer, **Saturday and Sunday, June 22 & 23**.

As always, please see our web site for details of these and other Old Lyme Historical Society events. Thank you for your support!

— Mark Terwilliger, *Chair,*
Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.

Archives Open
Mondays 9:00 a.m – 1:00 p.m.
Thursdays 11:00 a.m. – 2 p.m.

Please submit any research requests to:
info@oldlymehistorical.org



Old Lyme Grange Hall at 55 Lyme Street. Photograph by James Meehan, 2010

The Old Lyme Grange Hall – A Building to call Home *10th Anniversary*

Near the end of Summer 2013, I was contacted by fellow OLHSI Chair Tim Griswold with news that we had been hoping for. For 3-4 years we had been looking for a building to call "home" with little luck: too big, too expensive, not conveniently located. Tim had just heard from the steward of the Old Lyme Grange, Norm Stitham, that the Grange was going to turn in its charter, effectively going out of business, and was planning on selling their long-time hall on Lyme St. The next day Tim and I met Norm who showed us around the building.

We were already familiar with it as the Society had held a post card exhibit there as well as the launch event for our book *The Charm of the Place* (by Caroline Wakeman). This book was inspired by an 80-year-old painted stage curtain in the Hall featuring Old Lyme businesses of the 1920s. The Society Trustees quickly approved making an offer to the Grange. The offer, \$175,000, was accepted, a fund-raising committee, headed by Tim Griswold, was established and a target date for the closing was set for the end of February 2014. Publicity, mailings and personal contacts were made to both private individuals and local businesses and the money came in. Generous bridge loans from Trustees allowed us to close as planned on February 28, 2014 in the law office of Fran Sablone. The bridge loans were paid back, money continued to come in, eventually totaling \$225,000, providing us with a substantial cushion to begin renovations on the building.

We were delighted that the stage curtain was included in the purchase. I liked to joke that we had actually bought the stage curtain and the box it came in. Without the generous support of the local community, we would not have been able to purchase the building. We thank everyone who contributed.

*– Mark Lander and Tim Griswold,
OLHSI Co-Chairs at the time.*

2024 OLHSI *Series* OF EVENTS



Unlocking your Family Tree through DNA Matches

Presented by Cheryl Poirier

Whether trying to determine the birthplace of your third great grandfather or the identity of a birth parent, making the most of your DNA matches from Ancestry, 23andMe, and other companies is the key to your genetic past. Join Old Lyme's Cheryl Poirier as she explains how to get started in understanding your DNA match list, how to group matches together to find clues, and how to validate your findings. As part of a "search angel network," Cheryl has been providing genealogy assistance to individuals in North America and the UK for five years. She will share several case studies to demonstrate the way DNA analysis can solve long-standing puzzles.

**Thursday,
March 21, 2024, 7 p.m.
55 Lyme St. Old Lyme, CT**

*Free Admission
Donations are welcome for the
Carol Noyes Winters Scholarship Fund*

Lyme Tea Pary –250 Years Ago

(Continued from page 1)

As the statutory deadline for unloading the tea and paying the tax arrived, a highly organized 'mob' of Patriots in war paint and black-face, disguised in old rags and blankets, descended on the ships tied up at Griffin's Wharf. They raised the tea chests from their holds, broke open the chests, raked out the tightpacked tea and shoveled it overboard, followed by the empty chests. Not a word was spoken above a whisper, as many of these men were substantial citizens with no wish to have their identities known. It was an extreme low tide that night, and 46 tons of tea soon piled mountain-high beside the nearly grounded ships. It had to be pushed away multiple times to mix with the seawater. The 'mob' swept up, put everything aboard back in good order, and dispersed into the night. Next morning, a floating island of tea in Boston Harbor had to be stirred in by patriot boatmen. A great success! By June, there would be Hell to pay.

As winter closed, part of the contents of that one missing tea chest seems to have showed up in Lyme, CT. Here is the report, from the *Connecticut Gazette* (New London):

Lyme, March 17, 1774.

Yesterday, one William Lamson, of Martha's Vineyard, came to this town with a bag of tea (about 100 wt.), on horseback, which he was peddling about the country. It appeared that he was about business which he supposed would render him obnoxious to the people, which gave reason to suspect that he had some of the detestable tea lately landed at Cape Cod; and, upon examination, it appeared to the satisfaction of all present to be a part of that very tea (though he declared that he purchased it of two gentlemen in Newport; one of them, 'tis said, is a customhouse officer, and the other captain of the fort). Whereupon, a number of the Sons of Liberty assembled in the evening, kindled a fire, and committed its contents to the flames, where it was all consumed and the ashes buried on the spot, in testimony of their utter abhorrence of all tea subject to a duty for the purpose of raising a revenue in America—a laudable example for our brethren in Connecticut.

Some 30 years later we find what may be the first use in print of "Tea Party" to describe these efforts to stop the spread of taxable tea. From the *Connecticut Gazette*, July, 1805:

A NUMBER of young gentlemen and ladies assembled in Harmony Grove, in the town of Lyme, for the purpose of celebrating the anniversary of American Independence: a collation was prepared by the ladies for the occasion, of which the party partook—sprightly conversation, and chaste conviviality, such as gladden the heart, and chase dull care, were the order of day:— among others, the following toasts were drank:

Sowers of Discord. — May they walk barefoot upon the thistles of anxiety, and reap the thorns of contempt with the sickle of despair.

The Tea Party. — Thirty-one years since, our fathers' patriotism deprived our mothers of the use of tea—may our mothers' tea never deprive us of our fathers' patriotism. . . .*

** Alluding to the circumstances of a general search being made, when all the tea, found, was taken and burnt.*

The destruction of the tea was a turning point. King and Parliament sent troops to occupy Boston, dissolved Massachusetts' government, and stopped all her trade and fishing until she paid the EIC £10,000. This would teach the colonies a lesson. It did, but not the one intended. The resort to armed force made the colonies despair of compromise. They armed for self-defense, knowing any of them could be next.

— Mark Terwilliger



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