

# River & Sound

OLHSI.org

Old Lyme Historical Society  
"The history of Old Lyme – the people of Old Lyme"

Issue 25 ☘ Summer 2017

## OLHSI Brings Renewed Life to the "Grand Drape"



In 2013, when the Society was offered the chance to purchase the former Grange hall, one of the determining factors was the beautiful, 85 year old painted stage curtain, known as a "grand drape." As we began to use the hall, we knew that we had something very special hanging on the stage but this became truly apparent when we found a book titled *Suspended Worlds* about the hundreds of such curtains located all over New England and, to a lesser degree, elsewhere in the country: in Grange halls, town halls, theaters, anyplace where people assembled and usually places with stages. We also learned that a company in Vermont named Curtains Without Borders specialized in restoring and conserving these curtains. A visit to Old Lyme by their chief conservator, Chris Hadsel, resulted in a proposal to restore ours.

On April 21 and 22, Chris and her associate Wylie came and worked their magic on the curtain which our Tuesday Morning Work Crew had already taken down. It was placed, rolled-up, on a 9' x 20' table surface and work began. The first step was to brush and vacuum the back side, whereon is a generic landscape, rarely seen, probably painted by a local artist later than 1929. Then the curtain was turned over, and as it was unrolled a foot at a time, several Society volunteers, using small dense foam sponge erasers, cleaned four square feet of the curtain at a time. No water allowed—the curtain had been painted using water-based paints!



Meanwhile, Chris and Wylie were patching a few small tears, pressing out wrinkles and touching up the paint. The curtain sat overnight with the wrinkles weighted down. Much of day two was devoted to re-attaching the curtain to the roller. (The curtain rolls from the bottom up.) Interestingly, the roller is a piece of 1920s-era galvanized, corrugated steel downspout which doesn't sag, was inexpensive and probably available at a local merchant's, most likely Rowland's Store (where the Cooley Gallery is now located). This store was one of the businesses which purchased ads on the curtain. The roller was padded to smooth out the corrugations and the curtain was re-attached by sewing a strip of muslin glued to the bottom edge of the curtain to the padding. New hoisting ropes and pulleys were installed and the curtain was lifted into place and re-attached to the 4x4 beam near the ceiling. The beam had been reinforced by the Work Crew to eliminate sag.

The curtain now hangs in its restored glory. The ads on it represent businesses of the 1920s, some of which, such as Speirs Plumbing, Reynolds Garage and the Essex Savings Bank are still with us today. Other businesses, like Champion Insurance, Jewett Funeral Service and the Essex National Bank are still with us, albeit under a different name. Please stop in when we are open and see this wonderful piece of Old Lyme History.

— Mark Lander



Photographs by James Meehan



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

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*River & Sound*  
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*Photograph by James Meehan*

*Old Lyme Historical Society 2017–2018 officers: Mark Lander, Co-Chairman, Andi Williams, Secretary, Ned Farman, Co-Chairman and Ann Marie Jewett, Treasurer.*

## *From the Co-Chairs*

It's been a fairly quiet spring for the Historical Society. In April, Chris Hadsel and her colleague from Curtains Without Borders came and worked their magic on our 1929 stage curtain. A week later, the Society held its Annual Dinner Lecture at the Lymes' Senior Center. Old Lyme Historian Ned Pfeiffer spoke about the events leading up to World War I, an appropriate topic for the 100th anniversary of the United States' entry into that war. Next year, he will talk about Old Lyme's contributions to and sacrifices in the "War to end all wars."

Our Tuesday Morning Work Crew continues to make progress on the renovations to the building. Looking back over the past two years we have seen the creation of an office space in the former entry foyer and the removal of the 1950s dropped ceiling, which exposed the beautiful beadboard underneath. Thanks to the Mitchell Fund, new period lighting was installed in the office area and the main hall.

The next major project was the creation of a temperature-controlled archive room in the former basement dining hall. This room is now complete and the Archives Committee has been diligently working two days a week to accession and file the thousands of documents and items donated to us over the years. The archives room has its own climate control system and, like the rest of the building, has a full alarm system for any eventuality. The Work Crew is just finishing up the reading room, located outside the archives room. Part of the reading room project has included construction of a furnace room which houses the new propane furnace and air conditioning unit. The next step will be to create handicapped access and new stairs in the back of the building, followed by a wheelchair lift. We owe great thanks not only to the Work Crew but also pro bono architect Steve Joncus and all the contractors: electricians, plumbers, heating technicians, alarm people and sheetrock installers who have graciously donated or provided discounts on labor and materials. Board member Bob DiNapoli oversaw the addition of shelves in and the painting of our book storage room. Thanks also to Board member Sheila Wertheimer for overseeing the planting of shrubs in front of the building.

Several Society members are donating their time to the archives committee and townspeople have volunteered for other projects. We hope to see local students becoming involved as well. We have also hired a part-time custodian, Ray Mastronunzio, whom you may remember as the former custodian at the OL-PGN Library. After only a few weeks, the results are obvious. As always, we thank the members of the Society, the Town Government and local businesses for their support, both financial and in kind. We could not possibly have accomplished what we have in three and a half years without you. We are looking forward to seeing you at the Midsummer Festival.

*—Mark Lander & Ned Farman  
Chairs, Board of Trustees, Old Lyme Historical Society*

## General Lafayette Visits Old Lyme

In 1824, the Marquis de Lafayette, one of the last surviving heroes of the American Revolution, returned to the United States as “The Nation’s Guest”. His visit filled the nation with pride and a sense of unity. Lafayette was feted, honored, breakfasted, banqueted, paraded, toasted and canonized as a secular saint as he made his way from town to town. Every city, village, and hamlet vied for a visit, planning ever more elaborate celebrations in his honor. Memorial arches were built, ballrooms festooned with bunting, and parade routes lined with children raining flower petals upon the man known as “The Hero of Two Worlds.”

As a teenager, Lafayette had dedicated himself and his fortune to the cause of American liberty. When the Americans took up arms in 1776 against France’s archenemy, England, he outfitted a ship and sailed to America, offering to fight for no compensation, and pay his expenses out of pocket. At 19, he was made a Major General in the Continental Army, serving with distinction from Brandywine to Rhode Island, and finally at Washington’s side in Yorktown for Cornwallis’ surrender.

On July 28, 1778, en route to Newport, General Lafayette marched up the Boston Post Road into (Old) Lyme and encamped his troops on the town green. These troops, serving under the stars and stripes of the new nation and the fleur-de-lis of her oldest ally, were a diverse array of men high-born and low, Americans and Frenchmen, Yankees and Native Americans, freemen and slaves. This “motley crew” was one of the most disciplined, well-dressed, and impressive in the American Army. Lafayette visited the Parsons’ Tavern, a haven for the Sons of Liberty, and spent the night across the street at the home of John McCurdy (1 Lyme Street).

After the Revolution, Lafayette returned to France and was hailed as a hero. He advocated for universal freedom, authored The Declaration of the Rights of Man, and promoted the ideas that would spark the French Revolution, but events soon overtook him, and he was forced to flee, suffering a harsh imprisonment in Austria. Upon his release, he made plans to visit America. The youngest American General, and one of the last surviving officers of the Revolutionary War, was now returning to the land he loved and for which he had fought. That land, now a free and prosperous nation, dearly loved him in return.

The festivities that greeted Lafayette upon his arrival in New York City on August 15, 1824 were unlike any that had been seen in the young nation’s history. 30,000 people cheered him at the Battery, and another 50,000 watched the parade from Broadway to City Hall. A massive banquet was held at Castle Garden. The effect upon the city, and later, upon the entire nation, was electrifying.

In a sense, Lafayette was a mirror in which the young nation could see its own reflection, and in so seeing, reflect upon its own image.

After a week in New York, Lafayette journeyed to Boston to visit another patriot, President John Adams. Traveling on the Post Road along the Connecticut coast, Lafayette’s carriage was greeted with cheering throngs by day, and solemn torchlight vigils by night. As he neared Lyme, a reporter said he’d overheard Lafayette’s carriage driver instructing his horse: “Behave pretty, now Charley—you are going to carry the greatest man in the world”. From far and wide across the state, people from all walks of life came to pay their respects to the man Connecticut residents, in their unique accent, called “The Markis”.



*Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette;*  
portrait by Joseph Désiré Court.

Two months prior to Lafayette’s arrival, Sarah McCurdy received a letter from her brother Robert in New York, detailing preparations for Lafayette’s visit to the McCurdy home in Lyme. While much of Lafayette’s itinerary was improvised after his arrival, it was clear that this return to the McCurdy mansion was planned and firmly fixed even before Lafayette left France—a sign of the great esteem Lafayette held for the McCurdy family and the town of Lyme. By comparison, even the important revolutionary city of New London didn’t know for sure if Lafayette would visit until August 18th, just days before his arrival. Robert McCurdy, on the other hand, was writing to his sister in June of Lafayette’s planned visit to their ancestral home, indicating that not only did Lafayette view a stop in Lyme as a must, but also that McCurdy, a prominent merchant, was well-connected with the Marquis, and in contact with him while he was still in France. He was

thus able to write to his sister with certainty, well in advance, that the Nation’s Guest would be paying them a visit.

Lafayette spent the night of August 21st in Saybrook, a town that will go down in history as the only one on the year-long tour that actually charged The Hero of Two Worlds for a meal. The Marquis graciously paid his tab at the Pratt Tavern without blinking an eye. Across the river in Lyme, the good General would of course, as in the rest of the nation, not have to spend a dime. Lafayette arrived on Lyme’s shore on the morning of August 22nd, and was received in the sunny East Room of the McCurdy manse by the lady of the house, 18-year old Sarah, whom Lafayette would many years hence call “the beautiful Miss McCurdy”. Sarah was described as having blue eyes, with a “complexion like snow, yet with rosy tints”; she had, according to family biographer Evelyn McCurdy, “inherited the quickness of perception and bright wit of her family”. Sarah’s charms were not lost on the Marquis, and the morning he spent in the McCurdy home remained a cherished memory.

— Jim Lamos & Michaëlle Pearson,  
*Revolution in the Lymes*, History Press, 2016

## Old Lyme Historical Society Honors Members at the Annual Meeting

The Old Lyme Historical Society held its annual meeting on June 12, 2017 recognizing the following departing Board members: Julia Griswold, Dolores Green, Sheila Wertheimer, Martha Hansen, Jennifer Hillhouse and Tim Griswold.

Martha Hansen was recognized for her many years of service to the Board as Secretary and webmaster. Jennifer Hillhouse and Tim Griswold, founding members of the Society, were honored for their 12 years of service to the Board, Griswold having served as Co-Chairman for five years during which time he spear-headed the campaign to purchase and fund the former Grange building at 55 Lyme St.

The new Board members elected were Sandra Downing, Andi Williams, Nick Westbrook, Matt LaConti, John Pote and Mark Terwilliger. Officers for the upcoming year were announced: Co-Chairmen: Ned Farman and Mark Lander; Secretary: Andi Williams, and Treasurer: Ann Marie Jewett.



This year's OLHSI James Brewster Noyes Award recipient was Architect Stephen Joncus. This award honors a Society member who goes "above and beyond" in time and effort to support the Society. Steve is recognized for his efforts on behalf of the remodeling of the Society building at 55 Lyme Street and his work with the *Tuesday Morning Work Crew*.



## Old Lyme Midsummer Festival – July 28 & 29

Old Lyme Historical Society Open House.  
*Saturday, July 29th from 10 am to 3 pm*  
*OLHSI publications and products available for sale.*  
*Weaving Demonstrations by Area 4*  
*of the Handweavers Guild of Connecticut.*  
*Singer/Songwriter Jim Lampos 1-3 pm*



*Photographs by James Meehan*

This year's OLHSI Carol Noyes Winters Scholarship recipient was Lyme-Old Lyme High School senior Rose Datum. Shown with Rose are her parents, Michael and Jennifer Datum; Rose's sister Chloe, and Scholarship Committee member Kevin Cole.

Rose will be attending the University of Connecticut this Fall, majoring in history.



## Finishing Touch Added to the OLHSI Archive Reading Room

The TMWC (*Tuesday Morning Work Crew*) just added several more stars to their special Historical Society firmament. The team has created a fabulous Reading Room outside the Archives on the lower level of the building. The Archives volunteers having spent last winter in a chilly construction site can now boast of a carpeted room with warm cream colored walls, heating units, overhead lighting, and beautiful furnishings. Thanks to Jeff and Ralph Sturges, a handsome library table and chairs, lamps, and attractive mahogany shelves are in place. Thanks to Mary Jo Nosal, we have a new printer with scanner capability, and thanks to Paula Bingham, we have a Keurig coffee maker. What more could a hard working volunteer want in life! But wait, there is more. We have a closet in which to keep supplies, and a red cart donated by Ted Freeman, to bring files out to patrons interested in researching Old Lyme history. Sandy Downing, Archives Co-Chair, has worked unceasingly to accession over 1500 items which represents only a partial number of gifts to the Society. Alison Mitchell, Archives co-chair is continuing to annotate letters, legal documents, property maps, photographs, and other ephemera. We are pleased to now provide our Archives volunteers with the proper work environment. Please call us at 860-434-0684 the next time you find a piece of Old Lyme history to donate, and remember it will be safer in a temperature and humidity controlled Archives than in a damp basement or musty attic.

*—Alison Mitchell*

The Old Lyme Historical Society is seeking information about the Old Lyme Gun Club, the former owner of the building now at 55 Lyme Street, previously located at the corner of Lyme Street and what is now Maple Lane. If you have any information, photos or collectibles to share regarding the Gun Club, please contact the OLHSI by phone 860-434-0684 or email: [info@oldlymehistorical.org](mailto:info@oldlymehistorical.org)