

River & Sound

OLHSI.org

Old Lyme Historical Society
“The history of Old Lyme – the people of Old Lyme”

Issue 40 🍷 Summer 2022

Ferry Tavern

Today, the foot of Ferry Road is quiet: DEEP offices, an empty parking lot, a small waterside park with a nice boardwalk, a tiny marina. It is the opposite of its earlier life as the busy front door of Lyme/Old Lyme.

The Lyme-Saybrook ferry was a crucial link between Boston and New York from the beginning. A railroad bridge was built in 1870, but no highway bridge existed until the eve of WWI. Shipyards and warehouses once flanked the ferry landing. By 1835 the Bacon House tavern provided a meal or a night's rest for travelers waiting to go on by boat, road, or rail. The original building was enlarged by different owners over the years and its name changed to the Ferry Tavern.

When the highway bridge opened upriver, business by the old landing faded. During Prohibition the tavern was the haunt of rum-runners, gamblers, “and worse,” people said. The Great Depression drove many businesses under. The Hurricane of 1938 badly damaged the tavern and it was left empty, to the relief of many in Old Lyme.

Before WWI, most Americans had been born on a farm and a majority still lived on one. Their country had a first-rate economy and a fourth-rate military—about on a par with Portugal's. Thirty years brought radical change. By 1945 the US and the USSR were the supreme military powers of the earth. Much of the industrial world was in ruins. America and its allies were poised to begin a half-century of economic growth unprecedented in history.

Men who were barely able to raise trolley fare in the Depression had found themselves in uniform driving brand new trucks and jeeps filled to the brim with supplies, flying airplanes, piloting ships. They would not go back to the narrow prospects of their pre-war lives.

In this new, hopeful post-war era the old “eyesore” buildings at the ferry landing seemed quaint and interesting. In a country where everything was relentlessly new, a softened vision of the past had a soothing charm.

James and Joseph Viveiros bought the abandoned Ferry Tavern in 1946 and began to modernize and expand it. They were the right people, at the right place, at the right time. They knew what people wanted and set out to deliver it.

Their menu said it well:

The selection of foods presented here is plain good American cooking without confusion of foreign terms so you will know what to expect.

All our food is cooked to order as if you, yourself, were preparing a meal for your family -- therefore time is required for its preparation. In view of this fact please do not try to hurry anyone as haste creates confusion.

We use the best of ingredients available: fresh creamery butter, choice meats and fresh or frozen vegetables. All rolls, pastries and desserts are made here in the Tavern kitchens. Relax, rest, and enjoy your dinner.

With a beautiful view of the river, especially at sunset, it was a popular place to relax and enjoy a drink and a good meal. Mother's Day was their busiest time. With about 450 seats, they sometimes served over 1,800 dinners in a day.

“Dining out” was a different thing in the 1950s and 1960s than it is today. It was not a casual convenience, nor was it an excursion into exotic cuisines or refined and rarified dishes. For most people, it was a special occasion, and a chance to relax and be taken care of rather than doing all the work at home. Good, wholesome food in pleasant surroundings was the draw that kept Ferry Tavern filled, year after year. The menu was all favorites, all familiar. The most exotic item (and that, only on a holiday menu) was listed as: ‘Cioppino’ (for those who like it spicy).

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Photograph: Ferry Tavern, circa 1960. OLHSI Archives



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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River & Sound

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From the Chair

Dear Members,

On behalf of OLHSI, I would like to thank our fellow townsfolk for granting the Historical Society the \$9,000 we requested from the funds recently made available under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). We requested these funds for a variety of small projects, including reprint-

ing popular titles and exploring options for an audio version of our walking tour of historic Lyme Street. Thank you, Old Lyme!

COVID seems to take ever-changing forms. Vaccines substantially reduce the risks, but cannot (so far) entirely eliminate them. Life goes on, and we all get more practice in flexibility. At OLHSI we are cautiously optimistic.

The Oral History project (page 3) has resumed its work, and is welcoming volunteers. Our lecture series returned to 55 Lyme Street this spring with in-person presentations on the *History of Artisan Tile* by Paul Halferty of Lilywork Artisan Tile, and by our own James Meehan on the *History of the Stars & Stripes*. Make Music Day (June 21) was also a fun time, with music-maker projects for kids.

See Events in this issue for upcoming lectures and more. Please check our web site for new lectures and events as they are scheduled. OLHSI will be at the Mid-Summer Festival, July 30, 2022 by the Florence Griswold Museum, and we hope to see you there!

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

Upcoming Events -

Old Lyme Town Band & Ice Cream Social

Sunday, August 7, 2022 from 4 p.m.–6 p.m. • Old Lyme Town Green
*Co-sponsored by: OLHSI, PGN Library, Flo. Gris. Museum,
OL Hist. Dist. Comm., and LOL Chamber of Commerce.
Free Admission*

Rum Runners, Governors, Beachcombers & Socialists

Views of the Beaches in Old Lyme

Presented by Jim Lampos & Michaëlle Pearson

Monday, August 15, 2022 at 7p.m. • 55 Lyme Street, Old Lyme
Free Admission - Donations welcome.

History of Watch Rock

Hear it where it happened at the Watch Rock Preserve

Wednesday, September 7, 2022 at 5:30 p.m.

*Co-sponsored by: OLHSI, PGN Library, and the Old Lyme Land Trust
Please register at the PGN Library web site.*

Mechanical Banks of the mid-19th-early-20th century

Presented by Richard Franklin Donohue

Wednesday, September 21, 2022 at 7 p.m. • 55 Lyme Street, Old Lyme
Free Admission - Donations welcome.

OLHSI Archive Volunteers – 2022 Recipients of the James Brewster Noyes Award



Photograph by James Meehan

At the Annual Meeting of the Society on June 13, the James Brewster Noyes Award was presented to the Volunteers of the OLHSI Archives.

The Archives is really the heart and soul of what we are all about. This has been especially true during the past 2 1/2 years. After the initial closure of our building in 2020, with close attention to health protocols and the subsequent installation of two high quality air purifiers, the volunteers have been actively doing the essential work that

is so important and sometimes taken for granted. The hours of dedication, attention to the accuracy of accessioning materials, welcoming visitors, addressing inquiries, accepting donations, and keeping our community mission at the forefront of their work are all the elements of volunteer work at its best.

Volunteers that are presently active with our state-of-the-art climate controlled repository and related support areas are: Alison Mitchell, Nancy Beebe, Lilo Hess, Mary Ellen Jewett, Mary Jo Nosal, Sandra Joncus (phone inquiries) and Michaelle Pearson (social media inquiries). Others who have offered their invaluable volunteer hours and justly deserving of equal mention are, in no specific order: Sandy Downing (PastPerfect software setup); Paula Bingham; Susan Griggs (d); Karen MacDonald; Madeline Wenczel (invaluable translations); and Aoife Hubbard and Audrey Berry (former student interns).

The name “Archives’ Volunteers” will go on our plaque for the James Brewster Noyes Award. A framed print entitled *Osprey* by Catherine Christiano, from our publication, “Poverty Island”, will be on display in the Archives in honor of and gratitude for their work.

– John Pote

William Larson – 2022 Recipients of the Carol Noyes Winters Scholarship Award



Photograph by James Meehan

The Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc. is pleased to announce the 2022 recipient of the Carol Noyes Winters Scholarship which is awarded to an outstanding Lyme-Old Lyme student intending to study history in college. The award this year was presented to William Larson of Old Lyme. He is the son of Eric and Tracie Larson.

Throughout his early years and school career Will has developed and demonstrated his passion for history, and he desires to graduate college as a history teacher. This

fall William will attend the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Congratulations Will!

– Kevin Cole, Chair
Carol Noyes Brewster Scholarship Award

The Old Lyme Historical Society’s Oral History Project is Once Again Underway

After a long break during the pandemic, the Old Lyme Historical Society’s Oral History project is once more underway. A dozen interviewees have agreed to share their recollections of life in Old Lyme, and to let OLHSI preserve them for future generations.

Eye-witness accounts are a compelling window into the past. A person’s own direct experience is fresh, alive, and real in ways that the generalized “official version” of history never really can be. Collecting first-hand accounts of life in our town is an important part of our mission.

This is an on-going project at OLHSI, and we are always looking for members (or others) who would like to take part; either as subjects, or as helpers in the process of recording, transcribing, and preserving the interviews. If you have stories to tell about life in Old Lyme, or know someone who does, please let us know. If you would like to help with the interview process, we periodically offer training sessions in the Smithsonian Institution’s guidelines for oral history interviews. Technical skills (video, sound, etc.) are always welcome, but in no way required—just a desire to help. Drop us a line, or send us an email (info@oldlymehistorical.org).

Videos of some of our earlier Oral History interviews are available on our website: OLHSI.org.

OLHSI gratefully acknowledges the support of CT Humanities, whose grant this year has helped us to update equipment used in recording oral histories.

Support for the Oral History Project has been provided to Old Lyme Historical Society from CT Humanities (CTH), with funding provided by the Connecticut State Department of Economic and Community Development/Connecticut Office of the Arts (COA) from the Connecticut State Legislature.

Ferry Tavern

(Continued from page 1)



The Ferry Tavern got favorable mentions in Duncan Hines' road-food guide, *Adventures in Good Eating* (yes, he was a food writer before his name was a cake mix brand), and in a *LIFE* magazine round-up of "must visit" eateries throughout the country. It was a famous destination for vacationers travelling in New England. People would arrive by boat as well as by car to enjoy the hospitality.

A large part of that hospitality came from the owners. Joe Viveiros was remembered by many employees as the best boss they ever had. By their accounts he was down-to-earth, generous, and focused on making the Ferry Tavern a success for everyone there: customers and staff alike. Former employees held staff reunions and kept mementos and clippings—it was that kind of place. The Historical Society is grateful to those who have donated some of their mementos to the archives.

Nothing, it seems, lasts forever. The Ferry Tavern was sold to New York owners in 1966. The momentum of 20 years of success carried it for a while, but times and tastes were changing. New owners cut corners, old patrons were disappointed, business lagged, more corners were cut. By the winter of 1970-1971 the new owners were considering closing up in the off-season.

On the cold night of January 23, 1971 the Ferry Tavern burned. No one on the scene called it in. In fact, the bridge tender on the railroad bridge spotted the fire, signaled his dispatcher, who phoned Old Saybrook to report a fire on Ferry Road. By the time the Old Saybrook FD got to Ferry Road (in Old Saybrook), they could see the fire was across the river. This was long before the era of cell phones, and land-lines had an unfortunate way of melting in fires—or being hard-wired to buildings that were far from where you happened to be standing. The Old Lyme Fire Department responded within minutes of (finally) getting the word, but the fire had already taken hold. Neighboring companies joined the fight. Thousands of gallons of water and steam built an ice rink around an unquenchable inferno. Old wooden buildings (and kitchens) burn remarkably well.

Years of wrangling ensued among potential developers, owners, the Town, the State of Connecticut, and various interested parties. In the end, exhaustion helped broker the purposefully bland compromise we see today.

No one really misses the hard-handed waterfront world of the old days, or having to wait (sometimes overnight) to get across the river. Nor do we miss the gangsters. But the Ferry Tavern? People who knew it will tell you: "*That* was a great place!"

—Mark Terwillige



Photograph by Michaele Pearson

History of the Stars & Stripes

On June 14th (Flag Day) the meeting hall at 55 Lyme Street was filled with a near-capacity crowd for James Meehan's presentation, "*The History of the Stars and Stripes.*" Meehan showed examples of some of America's earliest flags and explained the symbolism and history behind these designs, which were largely variations of the British Union Flag.

Then, on June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress passed the following: "*Resolved, That the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation.*"

However, the arrangement of the constellation was left up to the maker until 1912, so early American flags feature a variety of different star patterns, from the familiar circle of stars, often attributed to Philadelphia seamstress Betsy Ross, to squares, pyramids, diamonds, and rows.

Both stars and stripes were added as new states were admitted into the union, so the "*Star Spangled Banner*" that flew over Fort McHenry during the War of 1812 bore 15 stripes and 15 stars. In 1818, Congress standardized the flag to 13 stripes, representing the original 13 colonies, and one star for each state, with new stars to be added on the 4th of July following a state's admission to the union.

—Michaele Pearson