

# River & Sound

OLHSI.org

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

Issue 39 🍷 Spring 2022

## Shipbuilding on the Lieutenant River

Water transport was essential to the survival of Connecticut. For the first 100 years every settlement was connected to every other by water. Only watercraft could effectively carry the farmers' produce to market or fetch the supplies they could not make for themselves.

With abundant timber and good water access, that pressing need for boats and ships soon fostered a flourishing industry. The lower Connecticut was a major center of shipbuilding from the end of the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth.

Lyme and Old Lyme were as heavily involved as the rest. The Lieutenant River was the center of Lyme's first important industry.

The first town landing on the Lieutenant (1666) was built near the mouth at Marvin's Point, just upstream from today's railroad crossing. It had protected water access (via Ben Marvin's Crick) to the mouth of the Duck River near Watch Rock, and (via the Back River) to the Black Hall River and the settlements on Griswold Point. In 1907 a railway embankment was built across Ben Marvin's Crick, filling it in. The "Dugway" was dredged below the railroad to replace the historic water connection.

Before 1675 another landing was built upriver at what was probably then a ford (and later the site of the first bridge across the Lieutenant), at a place later known as Deming's Landing. This was just downstream of the present Lyme Academy of Fine Arts. It was the first center of commercial activity in Lyme. Its warehouses supported merchants trading with Boston, New York, and

the West Indies. It was also the site of at least one early shipyard building vessels for coastal trade.

Even a 30-foot sloop could make two safe and profitable trips to the Caribbean each year. Connecticut colony's tax laws strongly favored direct trade with producers, rather than trading through Boston or New York. Another factor promoting direct trade was that the British Customs Service was... easier to manage in out-of-the-way places.

The Sterling shipyard was located at the top of the Lieutenant on what is now the Lohmann-Buck-Twining preserve of the Old Lyme Land Trust. In partnership with merchants of the Sill family, they produced small coastal craft here into the early 18th century.

There are few records of the vessels produced in these early days, though both the

Sterling and the Deming's Landing yards are mentioned in town deeds as late as 1780. As ship sizes increased, new yards were built below the last bridge (Ferry Road). The Hill family yard, established before the Revolution, was a major builder in Lyme. Although shipyards continued to work in Lyme and Old Lyme well into the nineteenth century, the period between 1784 and 1820 was their heyday.

Merchants were the only source of finance for major projects like building a ship, and most were built on commission. Ownership of larger vessels was almost always shared out among several individuals or firms to dilute the risk. The builder and/or captain might hold shares, as well as various merchants.

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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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## River & Sound NEWSLETTER

*Editor:* Mark Terwilliger  
*Designer:* James Meehan

*Editorial Contributors:*  
Alison Mitchell,  
Michaëlle Pearson, John Pote

*Photography:*  
James Meehan

*Mailing & Distribution:*  
Cynthia Taylor, Nicholas Westbrook

Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.  
55 Lyme Street, P. O. Box 352  
Old Lyme, CT 06371  
Telephone: 860-434-0684  
Email: [info@oldlymehistorical.org](mailto:info@oldlymehistorical.org)  
[OLHSI.org](http://OLHSI.org)



## From the Chair

Dear Members,

As the Society anticipates spring, we wanted to update you on the events of the past winter.

The launch of our 2022 *Then & Now Old Lyme Community Calendar* was very successful. The sale of our award winning calendar, a great gift and a reminder of community events, serves as a major fundraiser for the Old Lyme Historical Society. We are happy to report that this year's sales exceeded those of the previous year. Once again, we are indebted to our loyal sponsors who insure our success with this important annual project, now in its tenth iteration. The annual holiday book and merchandise sale at the Halls Road Post Office surpassed sales expectations and we are extremely thankful for the continuing support of the Old Lyme community.

Along with many other local organizations, we participated in the Lyme Art Academy's Holiday Enchantment event of the season. We are grateful to the Academy for offering their lovely space, entertainment, and graciousness for an event that was wonderfully successful and well received. It was a cheerful boost of holiday spirit for Old Lyme.

As mentioned on page 3, the Old Lyme Historical Society has received a Connecticut Cultural Fund Operating Support Grant. We are so very appreciative. Thankful acknowledgement is due to the following for their collaboration on our application: Katie Balocca, Ross W. Higgins, Mary Ellen Jewett, Alison Mitchell, Michaëlle Pearson, Mark Terwilliger, Edie Twining and myself.

Mark your *Then & Now Calendar* for May 12. Thanks to the efforts of the Events Committee, we look ahead to a presentation on that date by Paul Halferty of Lilywork Artisan Tile. Paul will focus on the history of their craft. More details will be provided as we get closer. On June 14 (Flag Day), our own James Meehan will give a presentation entitled the "History of the Stars and Stripes."

Hopefully these events will be in-person. As an organization of sociable humans with a purpose, we look forward to that, keeping in mind that we must remain flexible. The same goes for other events coming this way for all of us: Memorial Day, Make Music Day, Midsummer Festival, Old Lyme Town Band & Ice Cream Social, etc., etc. See you there !!

The Society continues to welcome new members, volunteers, ideas, and wider community collaborations. Please check out the latest on Facebook, Twitter, LymeLine and OLHSI.org.

*John Pote, Chair,  
Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.*

## Charles Johnson McCurdy (1797–1891)

*Lawyer, diplomat, judge, and life-long resident of Old Lyme.*



Charles J. McCurdy served in Vienna as U.S. Charge d’Affaires to the Austrian Empire from 1848 to 1850. The 1800s were a politically charged time in Europe due to uprisings throughout the continent. This resulted in immigrations to the United States. Through his extensive correspondence with officials of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, The Archives is in possession of much of his letters.

One incident was McCurdy’s involvement with Louis Kossuth, Hungarian freedom fighter and briefly the president of Hungary. Kossuth, in fear of his and his family’s life, asked McCurdy to help him obtain passage to the USA for his wife and sister-in-law and also smuggle out the family jewels. McCurdy had to decline. Eventually, Kossuth had the opportunity to travel abroad, and while in the United States, he held rousing speeches pleading for Hungary’s freedom from the Austrian Empire.

McCurdy received requests from skilled craftsmen (as many as 200 at a time) from Germany, trying to leave with their families because of the unsettling political situation there, begging for money, passage, and even asking for a large tract of land in Minnesota. We at The Archives have yet to find McCurdy’s responses to these many requests. We are still researching the files and we hope to find them one day soon. Further online research has uncovered the fact that the community in Minnesota was established. Noteworthy is the fact that some of these letters were written in foreign languages, e.g., French, and just figuring out what language they were written in was sometimes a challenge. Hungarian was the most uncommon one we have encountered. Fortunately, we have been able to find Old Lyme residents who have done the translation of the correspondence.

Mr. McCurdy’s travels with his daughter Evelyn are well documented. She was his beloved companion on his more relaxing vacation weeks to Italy as well as his capable hostess in Vienna. The Archives’ volunteers have determined that Evelyn was smart, gracious, and beautiful because we notice hints of admiration in some of the letters from acquaintances to her father. Those admirers were unsuccessful because Evelyn married Edward Salisbury much later when back in the United States, though one of her suitors, the diplomat and poet, Théodore S. Fay, came to Old Lyme for a visit.

During his incredibly busy time with awesome responsibilities in Vienna, Charles McCurdy kept up a regular correspondence with his brother Richard McCurdy who worked as an attorney in New York City. We know that Richard knew Louis Kossuth and arranged his speeches in Manhattan. Charles often inquired about their large family in Lyme. Richard was also the liaison between Charles and the then Secretary of State Daniel Webster. Richard was influential in negotiating his brother’s retirement from Vienna, in part because of their old and ailing father in Lyme.

After 2 years of service in Vienna, Charles and Evelyn McCurdy returned to their home in Lyme which is at 1 McCurdy Court, Old Lyme.

–Alison Mitchell

Charles Johnson McCurdy photograph: Ancestors.familysearch.org

## OLHSI Receives CT Cultural Fund Operating Support Grant from CT Humanities

Connecticut Humanities, the statewide, nonprofit affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), has awarded the Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc. (OLHSI) a \$ 7,200.00 CT Cultural Fund Operating Support Grant (CTCFOSG).

The CTCFOSG will be used to support the Society’s mission to collect, preserve, interpret and promote the rich history of Old Lyme and environs by making the Archives collection more accessible, improving IT and online presence and increasing marketing to make the organization more accessible to the community.

John Pote, the Society’s Chair, said “*History isn’t static. New discoveries and new technologies broaden our understanding and enhance discussions among cultures and communities.*”

OLHSI was one of 624 organizations in Connecticut that was awarded CT Cultural Fund support totaling \$16M from CT Humanities. The CTCFOSG are part of \$30.7M of support allocated to arts, humanities, and cultural nonprofits through CTH over the next two years by the CT General Assembly and approved by Governor Ned Lamont. The CTCFOSG will assist organizations as they recover from the pandemic and maintain and grow their ability to serve their community and the public.

This grant was administered by Connecticut 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.

# Shipbuilding on the Lieutenant River

(Continued from page 1)

Ships were built by a master carpenter with a crew of skilled and semi-skilled workers, most of whom were also farmers. The main shipbuilding season ran from spring to late summer to accommodate farm work. It took many tons of standing oak and pine to create a ton of shipping. As ship timber around Lyme became harder to access, more was rafted down the Connecticut from Massachusetts and Vermont.

<i>Lyme Shipbuilding: 1784-1820</i>						
Type	# Built	Capacity tons (bm)		Length in Feet		% total tonnage
		min-max	Average	min-max	Average	
Ship	9	217-307	256 t	83-95	87'	21%
Brig	22	89-240	155 t	60-83	75'	30%
Schooner	30	25-291	99 t	26-93	65'	26%
Sloop	53	20-88	49 t	41-63	52'	23%
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>Total t</b>	<b>11,300 t</b>			

Ships were built without drawn plans. They followed well-established patterns for craft of various types and uses. Individual builders or buyers might prefer a particular mix of features. They might even carve a half-model of the hull if they had particular opinions on the shape best suited to the craft's intended use. Measurements would then be taken from the half-model to guide construction. One type peculiar to the West Indies trade was the 'horse jockey,' a vessel with low decks and high waist, optimized for carrying a deck cargo of horses or cattle, with space below for food and water.

In 1810 Lyme's population was significantly greater than that of New London or Norwich. Almost a quarter were single men over 25—many undoubtedly shipyard workers.

Until the advent of steam (with its far greater capital requirements) the maritime world was an expanding field for enterprise. Low barriers to entry and high risks meant there was often room to rise by ability. There were more opportunities than men or capital to pursue them. With few exceptions, businesses were run on a small scale. Family connections often provided the trust needed between merchants, shipbuilders, and ship's officers. Several of the fine old houses in Old Lyme (including that of Florence Griswold) are legacies of merchants and ship's captains who called the town home.

—Mark Terwilliger



Map Design: Edie Twining

## Upcoming Events -

### *History of Artisan Tile*

Presented by Paul Halferty

Lilywork Artisan Tile

Thursday, May 12, 2022 at 7p.m.

### *History of the Stars & Stripes*

Presented by James Meehan

Flag Day -

Tuesday, June 14, 2022 at 7p.m.

*Free Admission - Donations welcome.*

Old Lyme Historical Society

55 Lyme Street, Old Lyme, CT 06375