

River & Sound

OLHSI.org

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

Issue 27 🍃 Spring 2018

Crossing the Connecticut River to Old Lyme

Compared to today's quick trip, crossing the Connecticut River at Old Lyme was once an onerous event. In 1662, sometime after the first settlers left Saybrook Plantation and established themselves in what was then called East Saybrook, a ferry was authorized by the Connecticut General Court. The ferry was to be operated by John Whittlesey, later aided by a member of the Dudley family. Indeed, these two families were to operate the ferry for almost two centuries, either jointly or individually.

The first ferry may have operated between Ragged Rock Creek in Saybrook and the Lieutenant River on the east bank but eventually landings were established at the points where Ferry Road on each bank met the river. The ferries were subject to everything that the elements could throw at them: current, storms, fog, floods, tide and ice, sometimes halting service for hours, days or even weeks.

For over two centuries the ferries were most likely sail-powered as no other method would have worked on such a wide, deep and fast river until the advent of steam. When a traveler arrived at the river's edge, Murphy's law dictated that the ferry would, of course, be on the other side requiring the traveler to signal his presence with a flag placed for that purpose. By the time the ferry arrived and made it back to the other side, anywhere from an hour or more may have elapsed depending on conditions. An attempt was made to use two ferries, one on each side, but the problem of assuring that there was always a ferry on each bank guaranteed that this idea wouldn't work.

In the 1850s, the towns assumed the responsibility of operating the ferry and in 1885 a steam ferry, *Lady Fenwick*, arrived, assuring a faster, more reliable and less weather-dependent crossing. By 1904, *Lady Fenwick* was deemed worn-out and replaced by *Colonial*, purchased from the Palmer Shipyard in Noank. *Colonial* was about the size of today's Chester-Hadlyme ferry but, because of a boiler on one side and a passenger area on the other, had room for only one row of vehicles - perhaps two or three cars or horse-drawn wagons. *Colonial's* days were numbered as planning was under way for a drawbridge across the river.



The bridge could not have arrived soon enough as, in June 1911, two months before the bridge opened, *Colonial* was struck by lightning one morning. As there was no fire department in Old Saybrook at that time, a telephone call to Essex brought a tugboat which was able to tow the burning hulk away from the landing. Before long all that remained was the lower part of the hull with a ghostly steam boiler sticking up from it. The towns

were able to rent a ferry for two months from New London - a boat too big for the local landings and which frequently ran aground. This boat, however, served its purpose until the bridge opened in August 1911 ending the ferry era at Old Lyme-Old Saybrook for good. The last trace of the ferry was the Old Lyme "office," which was bought by *Colonial's* engineer, Frank Saunders, and moved to the site of today's Webster Bank where it became the "office" for Old Lyme's first gas station, later Saunders Pontiac, serving the area's transportation needs for many more years.

—Mark Lander

"The Lady Fenwick" Ferry to Old Lyme, circa 1890. James Meehan Collection.

Old Lyme Ferry Boat "Colonial" at Lyme Landing, Old Lyme, circa 1910. Old Lyme Historical Society Archives.



Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.
55 Lyme Street, P.O. Box 352, Old Lyme, CT 06371
OLHSI.org



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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From the Co-Chairs



Photograph by James Meehan

As the Spring newsletter goes to press, Old Lyme is experiencing yet another nor'easter. Undaunted, the Historical Society is forging ahead with ambitious projects. First and foremost is the decision to install a lift which links the Archives on the lower level of the 55 Lyme Street headquarters with the main hall on the first floor. More on this uplifting project on page 2.

You may notice that Co-Chairs Mark Lander and Ned Farman have been replaced by the team of Pearson and Mitchell. Family and health reasons necessitated a mid-

stream change in the leadership of the Society. Have no fear, both Ned and Mark are still involved. We wish them well as they sort out doctor visits, and the vicissitudes of modern medicine.

The Historical Society is made up of an amazing group of people, who pitch in and get the job done. At the most recent Board meeting, a discussion was held on the need to fill some upcoming vacancies whose terms will begin in July 2018. It was decided to use the Newsletter as a tool to recruit replacements, who share a similar enthusiasm for Old Lyme and its past. Hence, the HELP WANTED ad which appears on page 4. Board members serve for three years, and may renew their terms twice more. This system works well so participants have ample opportunities to stretch their wings in many aspects of our organization.

The Board also voted to sort out program options going forward, and to that end, has hired Tom Gezo, of TGBC Consulting, to lead us in a strategic planning process. This self-analysis, led by an Ad Hoc Committee ably chaired by Board member Nick Westbrook, is underway with a half-day retreat planned for this Spring. As part of the exercise, Board members were asked to fill out a multi-page questionnaire. There was a 100% response with barely a nudge from the committee to turn them in. It is hoped that the plan will give us clear parameters on what OLHSI can reasonably accomplish in the foreseeable future.

A salute is in order for Board member John Pote, who recently joined the Archives Committee. He has taken on the task of responding to all research queries received at info@oldlymehistorical.org. His journeys have taken him to Property Records in Town Hall, other historical societies, cemetery tombstones, and conversations with distant relatives of the person making the call as well as our own Archives.

— Alison Mitchell & Michaelle Pearson
Co-Chairs, Board of Trustees
Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.

Salt: A Revolutionary Essential



Saltworks Point, Old Lyme, CT. Photograph by Michaëlle Pearson

The onset of the American Revolution brought shortages of many commodities to the colonists. One of the most important items was salt, which was used not just for seasoning but also for preserving food.

In the 17th Century, a few saltworks had been established in New England, but salting was a time-consuming, finicky process and yields were quite low. The northern climate was also far from ideal, as it required many hours of sunlight to dry out the seawater and produce salt, so that by the late 1700s, most of the colonists' salt was imported, either from the West Indies or directly from England.

After the start of the Revolution, the British Navy disrupted this trade, though a small amount of salt was smuggled in by Yankee privateers. General Howe also confiscated the Continental Army's salt reserves in New York and Philadelphia, leaving the Americans in desperate straits, as salt was needed to preserve meat and fish for the Continental troops.

John Adams, as President of the Board of War for the Continental Congress, ordered that saltworks be established along the coast to extract salt from seawater. In 1777, a Congressional committee was appointed to "devise ways and means of supplying the United States with salt."

Saltworks were established in many coastal communities from Massachusetts to North Carolina. In some cases, men employed at a saltworks were deemed "essential", and were excused from military service, or given other incentives.

There were several saltworks in Connecticut, including one in East Haven, under the charge of Amos Morris, and at least one in Old Lyme, at "Saltworks Point", located between today's Old Lyme Shores and Edge Lea beaches. (41.2843° N, 72.2709° W)

In the years 1777 and 1778, the Old Lyme saltworks produced over 700 bushels of salt for the war effort. Some of the family names connected with the Old Lyme saltworks were: Brockway, Dorr, Ely, Taber, Lovett and Griswold.

—Michaëlle Pearson

(Sources: *Salt: A World History*, by Mark Kurlansky; *Rumrunners, Governors, Beachcombers & Socialists*, by Jim Lampos & Michaëlle Pearson); *East Haven's Revolutionary Saltworks* (article by Gregg Mangan at ConnecticutHistory.org)

Making History Accessible to All



Photograph by James Meehan

The Old Lyme Historical Society is taking another giant step forward in its renovation of the former Grange Building at 55 Lyme Street. The Board has signed a contract to install a handicap accessible lift which will connect the Archives and Reading Room on the lower level with the main hall on the first floor.

We continue to be grateful for the hands-on work of our *Tuesday Morning Work Crew*: Skip Beebe, Keven Cole, Ted Freeman, Ellis Jewett and Stephen Joncus. They are presently completing pre-installation tasks and expect the lift to be fully installed this summer.

Anyone wishing to support the Lift Fund Drive may send a check to The Old Lyme Historical Society at Box 352, Old Lyme, CT 06371. Potential donors can be reassured that 100% of their contribution will be used to make the Historical Society accessible to the public. It is important to note that the costs of this project are greatly reduced because of volunteer labor provided by the Board. Your Historical Society is on the move!

—Alison Mitchell



Photograph by James Meehan

From the Main Hall

The Old Lyme Historical Society's 2018 *Then & Now* Old Lyme Community Calendar was launched with a festive reception on November 9, at 55 Lyme Street. Highlights of the event included music by Skip Beebe, weaving demonstrations by the Area 4 Connecticut Handweavers' Guild, and of course a delectable assortment of food and drink. The Sponsors of the 2018 *Then & Now* Community Calendar were: Town of Old Lyme, The Chocolate Shell, Essex Savings Bank, Evan Griswold /Coldwell Banker, Lyme Art Association, Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library, Lyme Art Association, Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts, Florence Griswold Museum, Sound View Beach Association, The Bowerbird, and the Old Lyme Children's Learning Center. Sales have been brisk at several local retail venues as well as online sales at OLHSI.org. OLHSI Board member Bob DiNapoli once again volunteered to hold Saturday sales outside the Post Office on Halls Road in December.



Photograph by Bob DiNapoli

Also in the main hall, the Society hosted an event for our neighbor, the Old Lyme Children's Learning Center (OLCLC) on December 20, 2017. The children from the Learning Center presented a Christmas concert for family and friends. Refreshments were served by OLCLC and a good time was had by the large group of parents and friends who filled our hall to capacity.

From the Ways & Means Committee

Thanks to the dedication of our all-volunteer Facilities Team and supporters, the Old Lyme Historical Society is now nearing another milestone in upgrades to 55 Lyme Street. On the lower level, our first-class, temperature controlled Archives with adjacent reading room is now complete. The main floor has been restored to the unique character of its Grange past and features a large meeting room, exhibit area and a raised stage that features our historical backdrop, the "*Grand Drape*". The original beadboard ceiling has been exposed, and historically accurate lighting fixtures installed.

The entire building is now being serviced by a new heating and air conditioning plant. Our current major project involves installation of a platform lift to allow handicap access to both the lower and upper floors from ground level.

So now is the time to put our facility to good use. That is one of our most pressing next steps and we would appreciate your suggestions and ideas as we plan for the future.

What is of interest to you?

Do you have an interesting story to tell?

Do you have family roots you would like to speak about?

Do you have articles or documents you would like to donate and have displayed?

Would you like to participate in roundtable discussions?

What about a play or concert?

Let us know about any of your ideas. The Historical Society welcomes your input as we plan future community programs. Thank you for helping us fulfill our mission of "interpreting the rich history of Old Lyme".

– Robert DiNapoli
Ways & Means, Chairman
860-434-7018

Help Needed

Are you interested in local history or curious about regional folklore?
Do you enjoy working as part of a team?
Have writing or fundraising skills you'd like to put to good use?
The Old Lyme Historical Society seeks volunteer Board Members.

Must be able to attend a monthly Board meeting (second Monday of each month), and serve on two committees.
Congenial work conditions with like-minded persons.
No pay, but knowledge that the work involved is essential to preserving the heritage of Old Lyme.

Immediate openings. Email Ellis Jewett cejewett@yahoo.com
or Alison Mitchell alisonmitch@comcast.net