

Westbrook Historical Society

A Society That Preserves The Past

Newsletter, Spring 2007, Philip E. Curran, Editor

Westbrook Historical Society Purpose and Principle

The purposes of this Society are to bring together those people interested in the history of Westbrook, Maine, and to discover, collect, and preserve any materials and objects that establish and illustrate the history of the area. The Society shall make all such materials and objects accessible for viewing or study on the premises. The Society shall arouse interest in the past by holding meetings open to the general public, by marking historic buildings, sites, etc. and by using other media to gain public interest in Westbrook history.

The membership meets regularly for business and entertainment at 1:30 o'clock on the first Wednesday of each month, with the exception of July and August.

Officers

President, Donna Cousens Conley
Vice President, Suzan Roberts Norton
Secretary, Evelyn Libby Meserve
Treasurer, Nancy Joy Curran

Directors

Diane Turgeon Dyer – Ellie Conant Saunders
Alwyn Waite – James Burrill
Immediate Past President, Robert Smith

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The doors of the Westbrook Historical Society are open to the general public every Saturday morning, 9:00 o'clock to noon. Capable volunteer staff is present at that time to help visitors with their interests and their needs.

The doors are invariably open again on Tuesday mornings while volunteer workers are doing their chores, at which time the general public is also free to visit.

Friendship and sunshine cards

Anyone aware of the hospitalization, illness or grief of a member should call **Ellen Burrill** at **854-5897**. She will see that the person is comforted with a sunshine card.

Web site address

www.westbrookhistoricalsociety.org

When you come to a certain age, the sun begins to travel backwards. It lights the past. A homeland of youth and happy ignorance grows almost bright again. And you fall to boasting, not of yourself or your deeds, but of life. How delightful it was, how red were its roses, how crowded its perfect days.

Ben Hecht

March 7 meeting

Nan Cumming on hiking trails

The presenter at the regular March meeting was **Nan Cumming**, executive director of Portland Trails, whose mission is to save open spaces and build and maintain a network of outdoor trails in the Greater Portland area. It has already completed 30 miles of trails, installed a boat ramp on the shore of the Presumscot River at Riverton, and recently purchased land by the river where Westbrook's Haskell Silk Mill was located. Its new goal is to create yet another 50 miles of trails and develop an "adopt a trail" program.

April 4 meeting

Eileen Eagan on the coming of the Irish

Eileen Eagan, PhD., Associate Professor of History at University of Southern Maine and author, presented a vivid and generous account of the in-migration of the Irish to this area from the days of the potato famine, a century and half ago, until recent times. Her concentration was



on the place of the immigrant Irish women in the work force, and their stimulus for additional migration and cultural change.

Dues will be due July 1. Send \$10.00 to Nancy Curran, Treasurer, 222 Duck Pond Road, Westbrook 04092, or, bring them with you to a regular meeting

**Westbrook Historical Society
elects three volunteers to
lifelong membership**



The membership elected **Jane Gordon, Philip LaViolet** and **Eleanor Conant Saunders** to its exclusive roster of honorary members at its regular meeting on April 4, 2007.

Jane Gordon has been an active in the Society more than a dozen years. She served several terms as treasurer and most recently as a member of the Board of Directors. Jane served on the By-Laws, Library and Museum, Acquisition, Membership, and Sunshine committees. She and her husband, David, have both been among the dedicated “worker bees” for the Society.

Phil LaViolet has been an active member since 1998. He served four years on the Board of Directors, and is a “committee of one” who donated and has maintained most of the military collection at our Society. He updates the obituary files of the war veterans in the collection on a weekly schedule. He was a driving force at the **St. Hyacinth’s Historical Society**, where a large collection was accumulated and filed under his capable leadership. When the St. Hyacinths Society was down-sized earlier this year Phil offered materials pertaining to Westbrook to the Westbrook Historical Society.

Ellie Saunders is a founding member of the Westbrook Historical Society. A charter member, she has served on innumerable committees and served two terms on the Board of Directors. As Hospitality chair, she was a strong advocate for greeting all members attending meetings and feeding them following the meetings. She was Membership chair, Program chair, and willing member of the Calling Committee. She has been a faithful and devoted worker on the Library and Museum Committee, spending many Tuesdays and Saturdays at the Society headquarters recording donations, writing thank you notes to the donors and greeting visitors.

**Special Evening Program
Wed. May 30**

Special evening program for members and guests. Doors open at 6:30 to browse the collection. The special program begins at 7:00, with stories from the family members, homes and lives of immigrants to Westbrook from other countries.

Refreshment and social time will follow the program.

Eleanor Vallee will be in town, June 4

**Westbrook Historical Society reception will
welcome the widow of Rudy Vallee**

Hubert “Rudy” Vallee, graduate of Westbrook High School in 1920, veteran of World War I, and student at the University of Maine between 1921 and 1923, was a major star of Hollywood, Broadway, radio, television and recordings. Vallee, who always boasted of his Franco-American heritage and retained his given name as symbolic of that heritage, was famous for his version of *The Maine Stein Song*. It became a nation-wide hit through his radio programs and the sale of sheet music and records.



Rudy Vallee shared the family trait for *politesse*. People who knew him remember how considerate he was. Many Westbrook people were warmly welcomed at his home in Hollywood.

Rudy Vallee died in 1986. His loyalty to his roots and native soil is reflected in his final resting place in St. Hyacinthe’s Cemetery at Westbrook. After visiting the historical society museum, which houses a substantial collection of Rudy Vallee memorabilia, Eleanor Vallee said she will go to “see Rudy” and place flowers on his grave and on those of his family.

The reception for Mrs. Vallee will include all members of Westbrook Historical Society, as well as City officials including Mayor Chuluda and members of the City Council.

Annual Meeting, June 6

Article V, Section 2: The regular meeting in June shall be the **annual meeting**. Business at the annual meeting shall include the election of officers and annual reports in writing of officers/committee chairman.

(The officers shall be elected at the annual meeting in June of the even years...)

(There shall be four Directors. One shall be elected at the annual meeting each year and shall serve four years...)

The nominating committee proposes the name of **Beverly Marion** to be elected to the Board of Directors. Additional nominations may be made from the floor at the annual meeting.

New Acquisitions

Silk cocoons by Diane Dyer and Suzan Norton

The cocoons shown here are dated from the year of the



Haskell Silk Mill's closing in 1933. They were found on the internet, purchased jointly by members **Diane Dyer** and **Suzan Norton**, and donated to the Society's collection. They are

representative of the silks used by The Haskell Silk Company and shown to the children in Westbrook schools of years gone by as they learned about their city. Three other cocoons were found in the attic of the old Forest



Street School by Society member **Bob Gordon** and donated to the Society, further proof of the accuracy of the memories of those who remember them as teaching aids contributed by one of the city's

leading industries.

Book, "American Silk" by Jacqueline Field

Haskell's Westbrook mill was among the foremost silk manufacturers of New England and supplied the people of the United States in almost every state of the Union. Spun by silkworms, the silk on each cocoon is over one-quarter of a mile in length. The fibre is brilliant, fine in texture, and strong. The widely admired Haskell Silks of Westbrook were made of such selected cocoons. All the silks used in manufacturing came from Japan in the form of skeins. The skeins were rewound, followed by a procedure known as "doubling", and were then ready for the spinners.

Lest We Forget

We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved,
And now we lie
In Flander's fields.

Old-time fence builders' had 'em bull-proof, horse-high, pig tight

"Fence" is derived from a shortening of the word "Defense" and refers to the day when a fence was truly that - a defense of the farmer's crop from roving herds of animals, either domestic or wild. Fences have always been the advance guards of civilization. The western homesteader built them while the ranchers tore them down so their cattle might roam unrestrictedly.

Snake-rail fence may still be found in Maine, (this was written in 1939) although typical examples in a good state of preservation are not too common. None is more interesting and some of them have stood for a century or more. They are laid without the use of nails and Yankee ingenuity gave them their design. Wasteful fences, though, were the old snake-rails because they took up a lot of space and required more raw material than any other fences ever devised.

Homely as a stump fence

Stump fences were a by-product of the farm land clearing process as were the stone walls. Huge stumps pulled and pried from the earth were laid in a row, their crooked rots pointing in all directions. As fences they were highly effective if not particularly ornaments. They were responsible for that old New England expression, "Homely as a stump fence."

In the building of stone walls there was a two-fold purpose: the need of a boundary and the necessity of ridding the soil of the stones. When a farmer required a stretch of stone wall, he sought to enlist neighborly aid. Many hands, many stout backs were needed, so invitations to a stone frolic would go forth. It would seem that if ever a word were misused it was "frolic" as applied to building stone walls. Yet invariably there was hearty response to a "frolic."

On the appointed day the farmers and their husky sons left their daily routine to the hired man and arrived at the scene of festivities by sun-up. And when anywhere from a dozen to 20 rugged tillers of the soil, clad in overalls, turned to, matters moved. Never was there lack of raw material for few of those early farms could be found that were not cluttered up with the stones of all sizes and shapes. At noon came a recess when doughnuts and huge jugs of cider were passed around. Late in the afternoon, with wall completed or at least well along all hands eagerly answered the call to supper. And such a repast! A long table made of boards laid over sawhorses would be piled high with good things to eat and drink. The women played an important part in cooking up things for the "frolic" supper. Generally the day ended in a barn dance.

This old house

The old Dr. Hills house on Main Street

This old house next door to the Westbrook-Warren Congregational Church on Main Street is still called “The Hills House” by many people. The house was the family home of **Dr. Louis Hills** for



nearly 75 years ending in 1984. It was built in 1842 for **George Warren**, who was in the lumber business with his brother Lewis. Their father was **Captain John Warren** who had bought the twenty-two room

mansion on Longfellow Street in 1826, built by Enoch Freeman, and established his family home there. He was a great great grandfather of Society member, **Roberta Morrell**. In later years the son, George Warren, was a member of the Governor’s Council, and as such, entertained noted personages of that time in his Main Street home. Warren sold the house to **Hebron Mayhew**, who sold it to Dr. Hills in 1911. The plan of the house is unusual in that the large drawing room, running the width of the house, is located on the second floor, with a small parlor for ordinary use on the first floor. The house was well preserved by the Warrens, Mayhews, and Hills during their long residencies. It was further habilitated by later owners, **John and Patricia Donovan**, and the **John and Darlene Manoogian family** maintaining the excellent condition in which it is today.

Information for the preceding article is derived partly from the Westbrook Historical Society House Survey of 1984, “Highlights of Westbrook History,” and other archival sources.

Nationwide search for rare wallpaper design ends in Dr. Hills’ home

It is strange that there should be any connection between the home of Dr. Louis L. Hills of Westbrook, Maine and the Washington mansion at Mount Vernon. However, to Mrs. Hills belongs the credit for the restoration of the wall paper on George Washington’s bedroom at Mt. Vernon.

In 1775, General Washington was in the midst of making alterations at Mt. Vernon when he was suddenly called to take command of the Continental Army. Called away suddenly to war, he left the addition practically completed with the exception of placing the

finishing plaster on the bedroom. Prompted by impatience, his wife, Martha, ordered the room to be papered, selecting a wall paper of vivid design and color. When Bushrod Washington became the owner of the house in 1802, he took the bedroom occupied by his uncle and had the paper removed and the walls covered with white plaster. That was over 100 years ago.

When Col. Harrison Dodge, superintendent of Mount Vernon, was preparing the room for the George Washington Bicentennial celebration in 1932, he uncovered beneath the plaster, scraps of the paper which originally adorned the walls. Carefully removing the paper bit by bit, Col. Dodge recovered enough to paste on a background and to be photographed. Although the design was not complete, the photograph was sent far and wide throughout the country in an effort to find a similar design, in order that the bedroom might be restored to its original form before the Bicentennial celebration.

The search, which extended to every section of the Country was to no avail and the Mount Vernon Association, sponsoring the hunt for the design, quite despaired of restoring the original paper. Almost a year passed, when news came that the paper had been located in the files of Birge Company in Buffalo, N.Y. The paper had been sent some 10 years before by Richard F. DeNeill, wallpaper expert with Porteous, Mitchell & Braun Company, of Portland, and had originally graced the walls of the fine old Colonial home of Dr. Louis L. Hills at Westbrook.

About 10 years ago, Mrs. Hills, while having a wardrobe removed from one end of what was originally the reception hall of the old mansion, chanced upon a wallpaper of rare beauty. She carried a sample of the paper to Mr. DeNeill, a connoisseur of fine wallpapers, especially old colonial designs, who immediately saw that the paper was of no common pattern.

Mr. DeNeill sent the paper to Birge Company in Buffalo, N.Y., for further analysis and was assured that the paper had merit, but was not of such value that it should be copied for commercial use. They requested, however, that permission be given them to place the paper in their files. This was granted by Mr. DeNeill.

Remains in files, 10 years

The sample remained in the files for almost 10 years when it was found to be the exact counterpart of the design uncovered last year by Colonel Dodge and for which such a extensive search was being made.

Mr. DeNeill was notified of the discovery and immediate plans were made to copy the almost priceless paper. The paper was made from a wood block, as machinery would not reproduce the delicate sepia brown and the vivid blue and crimson colors in their actual intensity.

Only enough of the wallpaper was manufactured by Birge Company, to paper Washington's bedroom in Mount Vernon, to paper the room in Dr. Hills' Westbrook home, where the design was found, and to give Mr. DeNeill a sample for his collections. It was only through Mr. DeNeill's foresight and appreciation for rare Colonial patterns that the original paper was restored to the walls of the first President's bedroom, exactly as it had been placed there by Martha Washington so many years ago.

The fine old Colonial house at Westbrook wherein the wallpaper was found came into the possession of its present owner, Dr. Hills about 20 years ago. It is approximately 90 years old and was built by George Warren, one of Westbrook's oldest and best known families. It was later occupied by Hebron Mayhew who sold it to Dr. Hills.

The story above, written in 1931 by Charles W. Weaver, was found in an old newspaper in the archives of the Westbrook Historical Society.

Earliest deed recorded in Westbrook Dated 1657

Interview with Mrs. Isabel Ray in 1914

The first recorded deed in Westbrook was dated 1657, states **Mrs. Isabel Ray**, an authority on early Westbrook history. This deed concerned the land extending from what is now Capisic Pond to the Ammoncongin River, and it was sold by an Indian chief named Squillerygusset to Francis Small, a fisherman at that time.

Payment for this territory was one trading coat a year for Capisic and one gallon of Liquor a year for Ammoncongin.

"As quoted from a deed," said Mrs. Ray, "two Indian sagamores, in 1666, conveyed to George Munjoy a tract of land and that is described as beginning on the other side of the Ammoncongin River at the great falls, the upper part of them called Saccaribegg, and so down the river side under the lowermost planting ground, the lowermost part thereof and so from each of the aforesaid bounds to go directly into the woods as said Munjoy willed, not exceeding one mile, with all the woods and privileges thereunto belonging."

Mrs. Ray stated that in 1729, Joseph Conant, one of the early settlers of Westbrook, established a saw mill at Westbrook and this was the first and earliest industry introduced. Lumbering was carried on for about 150 years and at one time there were 19 saw mills running night and day. Also, it was not an uncommon sight to behold 26 yoke of oxen carrying heavy loads of lumber from Westbrook to Portland.

About 1830 the cotton industry was started. As this prospered, in 1847, the paper industry, an industry for which Westbrook is now famous, was begun. The first firm was known as Day and Lion. However, in a few years they were taken over by Grant and Warren Co. Following the establishment of the paper mills, the silk industry came into prominence, and the result was the establishing of the Haskell Silk Mill in 1874.

The name of Westbrook was given our city in memory of Colonel Thomas Westbrook, a man prominent in civic and military affairs, and a former resident of Stroudwater in 1814.

Mrs. Ray related that the territory before this comprised of what is now the islands of Casco Bay, Westbrook, Portland, Cape Elizabeth, Deering and Falmouth, were all under the name Falmouth. In 1768 Cape Elizabeth seceded and formed a separate township. Portland followed suit in 1786, and later Deering in 1871, thus leaving Westbrook which extended from the old power house in Portland to the Gorham line, with 2,800 inhabitants.

"In 1887," continued Mrs. Ray, "our town government was so unwieldy that we wished to become a city. A charter was secured and in February 1891 we became a city. The first election was held the following March and resulted in the Honorable Leander Valentine being elected first mayor of the City of Westbrook."

One hundred ten years ago 1897

The **Familistry Club of Westbrook**, which is composed of a number of young men of that city who have banded themselves together will meet with their first social assembly in Odd Fellows Hall on Nov. 10. The club is named after a club which flourished in England in 1580, so called for the familistic affection professed by its members toward all peoples, however wicked.

Sixty years ago Dec. 20, 1946

Vallee Square to get two new buildings

Two modern, one-story buildings in the Vallee Square business district will be erected soon at an estimated cost of \$50,000 replacing three wooden structures, believed to be the oldest buildings in the Square. Louis Kourapis of Conant Street, who came to this Country from Athens, Greece, nearly 40 years ago to work in a paper mill at South Windham and a few years later entered

Louis Kourapis of Conant Street, who came to this Country from Athens, Greece

the fruit business here, announced plans for the new buildings today.

A single dwelling, in the rear of the property on Central Street, and the store occupied by Kourapis since April, 1915, have been razed and foundation for the first new store will be poured Tuesday. Kourapis will occupy this building which will be 20 by 86 feet. The second building will be erected in November following the completion of the first structure, Kourapis said. The latter, which has not been rented, will be 30 by 100 feet.

Kourapis purchased the portion of the block now occupied by a supermarket and a restaurant, in 1926 from Mrs. William C. Farley and the late Frank P. Pride, who inherited the property from their father, Dwinal Pride, operator of a livery business here many years. This property was modernized in 1939 following the fire in the supermarket. The second half of the block was purchased in December, 1946 for \$20,000 from Miss Hazel M. Valentine of Saco Street, and her sister, Mrs. Vienna McCubrey of Portland, granddaughters of C. P. Paine who operated a general store here for many years prior to his death about 65 years ago.

Many businesses have been conducted on the site including a barber and tailor shop by William O'Brien, fish market, grocery store and restaurants at various intervals.

Kourapis, when he rented the property from the Paine family 33 years ago, made the barber and tailor shops into one store and has operated a fruit business and soda fountain here since. He has transferred his store to another section of the block until the new place is ready for occupancy.

Kourapis entered business here as a partner with his cousin, Alex Kourapis. Following two years with the army in World War I, Louis bought out his partner and the latter returned to Athens.

Save these dates

May 30

Evening program for members and guests

June 4

Reception for Eleanor Vallee

June 6

Annual meeting