

# Westbrook History Quarterly

*The Newsletter of the Westbrook Historical Society*  
Spring 2010

## President's Message

Spring has arrived, and my second term as the president of the Westbrook Historical Society will soon be over. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the members of the Society for the assistance and support you have given the Society over the past four years.

Special thanks to Vice President Byron Dyer who has taken over the last three winters so that I could travel in the Midwest. And thanks to all of you who come in each Tuesday and Saturday to file, answer queries, clean, or do general research. I will not name names lest I overlook someone, but your dedication is appreciated!

Thank you to all the committee members. The Society could not function without you. And a "thank you" to each and every member who never refused when I called for help. The support of every member is what makes the Westbrook Historical Society so special. I hope some of you will consider serving as an officer or committee member in the next two years. Believe me, you'll get more out of it than you're required to give.

Thanks to all!

*- Donna Cousens Conley*

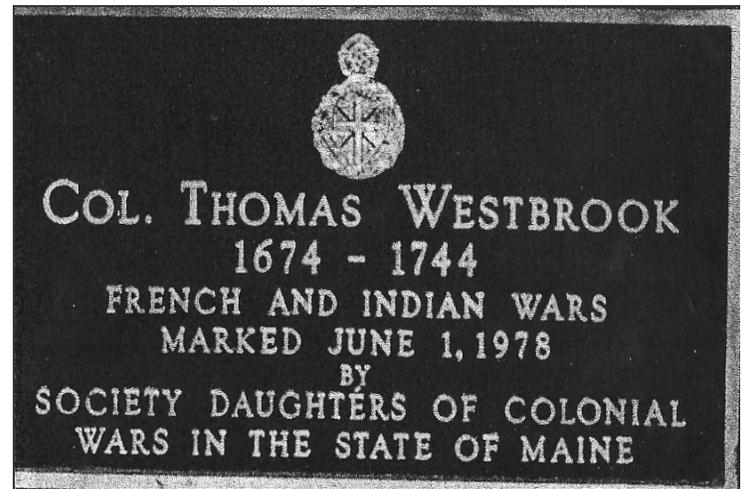
## Upcoming Events

Monthly Meeting  
Wednesday, April 7, 2010  
1:30p

Monthly Meeting  
Wednesday, May 5, 2010  
1:30p

Annual Meeting  
Wednesday, June 2, 2010  
1:30p

## Who's Buried in Westbrook's Tomb?



The epigraph on Col. Thomas Westbrook's grave.

Col. Thomas Westbrook, the namesake of this fair city, died in February 1744 nearly 3,000 pounds in debt. Per the laws at that time, creditors were able to confiscate debtors' remains and hold them ransom until the debtors' survivors paid back their debts.

Seeking to avoid an ignoble death that countered the remarkable life of the soldier, civic leader, and businessman, the family of Col. Westbrook were able to secure the late colonel's remains without paying back his debts, so they were thus forced to bury Col. Westbrook in an unmarked grave.

Rumors concerning the whereabouts of Westbrook's

**continued, page 3**

# The Park Bench

As with most potential crises involving demographics, the greatest challenge the Westbrook Historical Society faces is a quiet one. Because the Society's inability to rejuvenate its membership rolls can neither be fully resolved nor fully realized today, next month, or even next year, it is not a topic that attracts a lot of attention or discussion. Nevertheless, simple arithmetic suggests the existential threat that may loom in the Society's future should be addressed sooner rather than later.

There is no doubt that the Society is struggling to replenish its aging members and graying workhorses with younger recruits. Our youngest officer graduated from high school in 1958, and I'm pretty sure we can count the number of members who are younger than fifty-years-old on one hand. Over the course of this pamphlet and subsequent newsletters, I'll be outlining tactics the Society can employ to dovetail with the strategy of recruiting the next generation of members and volunteers. To wit:

## 1. Reschedule Society meetings for weekends.

I have been a member of the Society for at least four years now, but I have attended only one monthly meeting. Now, my lack of attendance at the Society's meetings cannot be blamed on apathy or a lack of interest. Instead, it can be attributed entirely to the fact that the Society holds its meetings in the early afternoons of weekdays. I am not unique among non-retirees for whom this schedule is simply unworkable. Therefore, let's help ourselves out by rescheduling all our monthly meetings and programs on weekends.  
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### Find of the Quarter:

From the program for a 1945 pep rally at Westbrook High School:

The football team of 1945 was *very* successful, winning three games and losing six. [Emphasis mine]

Talk about the soft bigotry of low expectations.

### Purpose and Principle

The purposes of this Society are to bring together those people who are interested in the history of Westbrook, Maine, and to collect, discover, 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 opening its meetings to the general public, by marking historic buildings and sites, and by using other media to gain public interest in Westbrook history.

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

### Officers

Donna Cousens Conley, President  
Byron Dyer, Vice President  
Rowena Walton, Secretary  
Nancy Joy Curran, Treasurer

### Directors

James Burrill, Beverly Marion, Mike Sanphy, and Alwyn Waite

### Open Hours

The Westbrook Historical Society's doors are open to the general public every Saturday and Tuesday mornings, from 9a-12p. Capable volunteer staff is present at those times to help visitors with their interests and their needs.

### Mailing Address

Westbrook Historical Society  
17B Dunn Street  
Westbrook, Maine  
04092

### E-Mail

info@westbrookhistoricalsociety.org

### Web site

www.westbrookhistoricalsociety.org

### Telephone

(207) 854-5588

# Dad's Work

## A Personal History

*(Editor's Note: The late Nellie Davis Spiller was a charter member of the Windham and Westbrook historical societies and an avid local historian. Below is an excerpt from an undated interview.)*

My father, Charles Davis, came to Westbrook to work in late August or early September 1881, when the gingham mill, a brick building, was under construction. The gingham mill four or five years later and was taken over by X Dana, who, sometime later, built a large addition at each end.

In the spring of 1883, Dad went to Cumberland Mills, where, at the junction of Main and Cumberland streets, the Warren Block was being built. That winter he did outside construction. He sawed all the roof rafters by hand. One winter he worked at the Warren Mill, where, just back of the present brick office building he helped erect a building for housing paper machines. This was later torn down.

In the spring of 1887, Dad went to work at the S.D. Warren mill. Until he could find a rent for his wife and small son, Raymond, he boarded at Fred Verrill's home on Main Street, site of the present Pratt-Abbott parking lot.

In the spring of 1888, he started building a two and one-half story house for his family on Rochester Street, facing down Lamb Street. Two or three years later he built a stable with a two and one-half story shed connecting it to the house. Under the house, he dug a well fed by a spring. With City water not yet available, we had spring water pumped to the three stories of the house. I well recall the physical shock when Dad rinsed me off with a two quart dipper full of this cold spring water as a finale to a bath in a tub in the large iron sink in the pantry. Five children were born at the Rochester Street home in Westbrook: Sarah in 1890, Philip in 1892, Ruth in 1894, Nellie (me) in 1897, and a son who died in infancy.

Dad worked at S.D. Warren from 7a to 5p with an hour out for lunch, seven days a week. The he worked about the house until dark. Base pay was \$2 a day or \$15 a week. Often when extra night work was required, Dad was the one to be called, although he lived farther from the mill than did half a dozen of the others of the maintenance crew. He recalled that once he worked until 11p, then was called back to the mill at 1a. He worked the rest of the night and continued to work all of the next day.

My father's very limited formal education in the country schools of Standish, Westbrook, and Gorham ended at age 19 with the equivalent of four or five years of present day education. In the late 1890s, working at S.D. Warren and hoping to increase his knowledge and chances of advancement, he took a correspondence course in Mechanical Engineering. This emphasized the practical aspects of mechanical engineering of that era. His only time for study was at night after his chores were done and the children were in bed.

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## Westbrook Streets

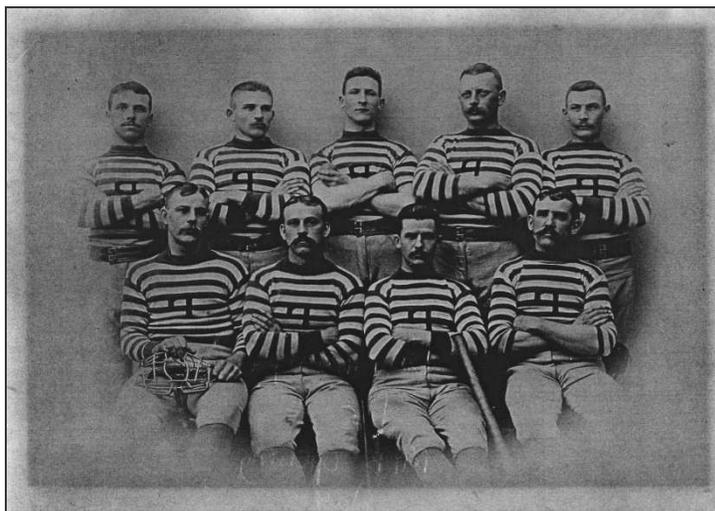
### Robinson Court

A short, dead-end street off of Monroe Avenue, Robinson Court was named in honor of Roy Robinson. Robinson served as a sub-master and science teacher at Westbrook High School from 1943 until 1954 and served as the school's principal from 1954 until 1967.

## Ellie Saunders

### Celebrates 90<sup>th</sup>

Longtime Society member Ellie Saunders celebrated her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday at the Westbrook Historical Society on Saturday, March 20 with ice cream and a cake featuring a photo of her historically-significant home on Conant Street.



A team photo of the Presumpscots of Cumberland Mills, a baseball team that traveled to the Atlantic coast of Canada in May 1890 to take on the Frederictons of New Brunswick in a morning-afternoon doubleheader.

## Bite-Sized Review

*The Wild, Wild East: Unusual Tales of Maine History*  
by William Lemke  
(Yankee Books, 1990)  
180 pages

William Lemke, a former state representative from Westbrook and a professor at St. Joseph's College, opens his book in the mid 1520s and closes it in the 1960s.

From that large chunk of time, he devotes 2-7 pages to 42 interesting characters and events from the annals of Maine history. There's a cogent explanation of the quasi-pugilistic Aroostook War of 1839, and a look back at the quasi-pugilistic heavyweight championship bout between Muhammed Ali and Sonny Liston in 1964. The stubborn temperance leader Neal Dow's role in the Portland Rum Riots of 1855 is analyzed, as is the role played by the stubborn Bowdoin president Joshua Chamberlain in that college's so-called Drill Rebellion of 1874. Other highlights include, but are not limited to, an examination of Maine's Know-Nothing nativists in the 1850s, the 1937 shootout on the streets of Bangor between law enforcement and the notorious Brady Gang,

If you are looking for a brief but well-written history of Maine, this book is a good one. And though it is chronological, the vignette structure of the book allows you to hop around its contents, depending on your appetite and your mood. *- John C.L. Morgan*

## Who's Buried in Westbrook's Tomb, cont.

burial spot swirled about for 232 years, until members of the then-fledgling Westbrook Historical Society organized an excavation of Westbrook's grave on the grounds of Smiling Hill Farm in 1976.

Current members of the Society were reminded of this history by local children's authors Diane LeConte and Patricia Larrabee, who presented their not-yet-published children's book at the Society's March 3 monthly meeting.

LeConte and Larrabee, both of whom are former librarians at Walker Memorial Library, spoke about their book, *Girl of the Past*, which is based on the premise of a modern girl connecting with the historical Col. Westbrook.

Members of the Society will be notified when the book goes to press.

# Five Questions

## Suzan Roberts Norton

*(Editor's Note: Westbrook Historical Society member Suzan Roberts Norton is a resident of Standish, but she can usually be found at the Society most Saturday mornings conducting personal research and giving research aid to visitors.)*

### **How long have you been a member of the Westbrook Historical Society?**

Since 2002.

### **In your opinion, what is the most interesting facet of Westbrook history?**

I'm fascinated by two things: I'm most interested in the silversmiths who worked on Stevens Plains (which is now Stevens Avenue and used to be part of Westbrook) and the Haskell silk mill and all the immigrants who came here to work in the mills.

### **Though you've never lived in Westbrook, but you're in the Society most every weekend. Why are you so involved in the Westbrook Historical Society?**

My family's from here. My grandfather grew up at 64 Saco Street, and his ancestors going back to 1774 lived on Saco Street. Also, I come here to learn about the rich histories and knowledge many of the Society's members have about the city's history.

### **What parts of the Society's collection have been the most useful when you've done your research?**

The Society's collection of my family's diaries have been very helpful. Also, the Society's indexed catalog on the computer has been very helpful.

### **How would you improve the Society, at least from a researcher's perspective?**

I'd improve it by encouraging more people to contribute their personal items, even if they don't think it would be significant. I also think we need to work harder to recruit younger members—working parents, young adults, and school-age children.

- John C.L. Morgan

# Recent Acquisitions

## Spring 2010 Edition

1947 Saco Street School class photograph  
Roberta Nadeau (December 4, 2009)

Children's coat, c. 1925  
Vaun Born (December 4, 2009)

Rocky Hill School photographs  
Ruth Knight (December 4, 2009)

Westbrook High School yearbooks  
Astrid Meggison (December 19, 2009)

Fire driver photograph  
Mike Sanphy (December 19, 2009)

Rocheleau clothing store wooden hanger  
Caren Fortin (December 19, 2009)

Photographs  
Paul Corbett (January 9, 2010)

John Henry Sullivan, Jr. family photographs  
Susan C. Carter (January 12, 2010)

Westbrook Woman's Club cotton throw blanket  
Paul Corbett (January 16, 2010)

Westbrook Rescue memorabilia  
Mike Sanphy (January 16, 2010)

Scanned photographs  
Beth Olmstead (January 30, 2010)

Letter on City of Westbrook Collector and Treasurer  
Marianne Kane (March 6, 2010)

1922 Carr shoe store calendar  
Pat Leonard (March 6, 2010)

1922 Westbrook High School class photograph  
Judy Getchell (March 6, 2010)

- John C.L. Morgan