

Westbrook Historical Society

Newsletter

A Society That Preserves The Past

Winter 2009

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE:

The Historical Society has recently received a two part Preliminary Statement of Intent from long time member Eleanor Conant Saunders.

The first part of the statement offers the Society a parcel of land on Conant Street which would be given to the Society upon acceptance by its members. The land is meant to be used as a place on which to build a Society museum and meeting place. However, construction must be started within four years of transfer or the land will revert to Eleanor's estate. Much thought, study and planning must go into the consideration of accepting this generous gift: the pros and cons of owning our own building, the legalities of same, the cost of the project and the undertaking of a major capital campaign. Anyone who is interested in heading up a task force to study the issue is encouraged to notify any board member as soon as possible.

The second part of the statement proposes the gift of the Conant Homestead and the Conant Family Burial Grounds to the Society. This gift would occur upon the death of Ellie and would come with an endowment for the upkeep of the property. It would be the Society's responsibility to open the house for tours and research (Ellie has an extensive scrapbook collection) and to maintain the building for future generations. As many of you know, this property is one of the oldest homes in the City.

As a Society member it is your duty to consider this proposal and the implications to the organization and to make your feelings known to the Board of Directors. Please plan to attend the next few Society meetings so that this issue can be discussed by a majority of our members. The membership needs to make a final decision by the Annual meeting in June.

Thank you, Ellie, for this wonderful, thoughtful gift.



[A copy of the entire Statement may be viewed at the Society office.]

THE CONANT LAND & HOMESTEAD



Samuel Conant purchased the land at 89 Conant Street at an unknown date but it is known that in 1768 his grandson Solomon built the original part of the house that still stands there. Then in 1772 Solomon added the main house to the original kitchen and upstairs chamber. Over the years there have been improvements and additions but the house remains much like the original. This property has been owned by the Conant family since 1768. Nine Conant generations have lived in this house and eleven generations of Conants have lived in the area since Joseph Conant, his wife Sarah Jewett Conant and his brother Samuel, became the first permanent settlers in Saccarappa in 1721. (The brothers were interested in sawmills and built the first grist mill in the area.) It is rare for a single family to have owned and lived in the same property for such a long period of time.

The current owner, Eleanor Conant Saunders, has lived in the house since 1932 when her parents Percy & Eva Conant rented it from Percy's cousin Suzan Conant Norton. When Suzan died in 1934 she left the land and buildings to her best friend who kept it as rental property for two years before selling it to Percy in 1936. This was the only time, since 1768, that the property was out of family hands.

The Old Conant Burial Grounds abuts and is a part of the property. This well-kept cemetery, with many beautiful hand-carved slate headstones, contains the remains of many Conant family members as well those of many soldiers from the War of 1812. The cemetery is now closed for burials except for the few remaining Conants who have been granted lots.

WESTBROOK NATIVE: ARTT FRANK



Photo taken January 2008 in Green Valley, AZ

Artt Frank was born in Westbrook in 1933 to Clayton & Rose Buotte Frank. (He added the 2nd 'T' to his 1st name many years ago at the urging of his friend Chet Baker.) Artt and his six siblings attended Bridge St. School near their Webb St. home on Scotch Hill. From an early age Artt was drawn to music. He would listen to the rhythmic sounds made by the machines at S.D. Warren, where his dad worked, and to the trains with their "triplet sound" as they rolled through the City and he would make his music by tapping on all the mailboxes on Brown Street. Artt never took a music lesson, nor can he read music to this day, but he certainly can feel it and make it! When writing his music today Artt "scats" the melody and a friend adds the cords and writes the notes for him.

Artt's drumming career was honed by playing in the Crusaders Drum & Bugle Corps and performing in groups at the Graymore Lounge and the Riverside Dance Hall. Gene Krupa was his favorite drummer, with Buddy Rich running a close second. Artt listened to them on radio and would try to duplicate their sounds. When he was 16 he heard a new kind of music, Charlie Parker and his Quintet playing "Bebop" and he immediately took to it. [Artt says the difference between traditional jazz and Bop is in the tempo and the complexity.] He was lucky to have been born in a simpler time when on a weekend trip the NYC to see Charlie Parker, he was able to ask to sit in with the group....and was invited to! For a teenager from Westbrook this was fantastic!!

With optimism and lots of talent, Artt left Westbrook when he was 17 to make his mark in the world. And he has had a successful and eclectic career...house painter, actor, movie star, writer (70 songs, a drumming 'how-to' book and a life story on Chet Baker), singer and Bop drummer. While living in Hollywood he was friends with other Maine natives like Jack Feeney (director John Ford of Portland) and Rudy

Vallee. He also performed with Lenny Breaux, a Lewiston native.

No matter what else he did, his first love was always music. You may not know much about jazz...but you can't help but be impressed by some of names that he has preformed with: Chet Baker, Roy Ayers, Chris Brubeck, Lenny Breaux, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Don Doane, and Pat Morrissey. [A full bio can be seen at www.arttfrank.com]

Now living in Green Valley, AZ with wife Lisa, Artt may be plagued with emphysema but he still remains active in the music field. Well known to Tucson jazz fans, he often attends and sits in on the Sunday night jam sessions at the Old Pueblo Grill there. (Norm and I were recently privileged to witness one of these sessions ...how proud we were to see the respect shown to this Westbrook native.)

Artt has never forgotten his roots, frequently talking about his youth in Maine and returning every few years to visit his sisters Barbara & Brenda. After being initially contacted by Society member Suzan Norton, Artt has graciously donated his book *The Be Bop Drummer* and many of his CDs to the Historical Society. Stop into the Society to learn more about this Westbrook native.



WHAT THE BLUE BLAZERS?

Ever wonder why all of Westbrook High School's teams are called **Blue Blazers**?

When mast trees were nearly gone in England, the King appointed Mast Agents to scour the woods of the new world for mast trees. Col. Thomas Westbrook served as a Mast Agent after the French and Indian Wars and in 1727 he chose Stroudwater as the ideal location for the base of his operations. He searched the woods surrounding what is now The City of Westbrook and marked any tree found suitable with a blue blaze. Only the tallest and straightest pines, suitable for ships' masts in the Royal Navy, got the blue blaze. And thus ... the Westbrook Blue Blazers!

(Thanks to Norm Conley for suggesting this subject, found on the sports page of course!)

CARING FOR THE POOR IN THE 1800s

[Thanks to Suzan Norton for this article and for sharing the contents of the following letter from her personal collection.]

Written in 1835, this letter is on one sheet of rag paper folded resourcefully with one section containing the contents of the letter and the rest fashioned into an envelope complete with address. There was no waste with paper materials at that time. When written, Maine had been a State for only 15 years and Andrew Jackson, our seventh President, was in office.

The letter is addressed to 'Gentlemen Overseers of the Poor of Bingham, County of Somerset, Main'. It had been sealed with red sealing wax. Maine was spelled with no 'e'. Inside the contents are as follows:

Westbrook September 15th, 1835

Gentlemen,

Mrs. Abigail Knight an inhabitant of your town has now become chargeable in this town as a pauper. We conceive it necessary to give you this information that you may order her removal or otherwise provide for her as you may judge expedient. We have charged the expence (sic) of her support which has already arisen to your town and shall continue to do so long as we are obliged to furnish her with supplies ~ Mrs. Knight is now at the house of Mr. Saml. A. Proctor in our town at an expence (sic) of one dollar twenty five cents per week & information we rec'd by Mrs. Proctor, a daughter of Mrs. Knight Certifies that her Mother was Lawfully Married to John Knight formerly a resident in your town.

*We are Gentlemen with much respect
Your Most Obedient Servants*

*The Gentlemen Selectmen or Overseers of the Poor of
the Town of Bingham}*

*Isaac Mason
Cyrus Cummings } Overseers of the Poor Westbrook
H.C. Babb*

I found it most interesting how many of the troubles within a town were usually handled by the town, in a day when there was not too much help for anyone. If you could not carry your own weight, you were considered a burden. I am glad that some of those attitudes have changed a little over the years. I often wonder what it must have been like to have a

serious disability back then. Life was tough, and family and neighbors were a vital part of each family's survival.
Suzan Roberts Norton

[Ed. Note: see Suzan's blog for other stories of Westbrook: <http://blog.likes2write.com>. The City Alms House was leased to Mrs. Madeline Louise Bearce in 1949 for use as a nursing home. The city then boarded inmates there for \$60/month.]

WESTBROOK THEN AND NOW



Photos courtesy of Mike Sanphy

Sometime after 1885 Dr. Felix Barrett moved to Westbrook and by 1891 he was an established physician and prominent citizen of the City. By 1909 he had established the **Barrett Hospital** in his home at 537 Main Street. Dr. Barrett died April 27, 1920 and the 1921 Westbrook City Directory listed the site as the Westbrook Hospital. (Note the carriageway on the original building.)

The hospital was used by most of the local doctors to service residents of Westbrook, Gorham and Windham. Its capacity was 22 beds and 8 bassinets. The hospital closed its doors in Dec 1959 due to new safety requirements for sprinklers and wider stairways.

The building later was made into apartments and today its outside is well kept and closely resembles the original building.



PEWTER AT STEVENS PLAINS, WESTBROOK

Westbrook changed its geographical boundaries many times before becoming the City we know today. In the early 1800s its eastern boundary extended to include the Deering area (which encompassed Nasons Corner and Capisic Street), all the way over to Woodfords and Morrills Corner. At the start of the 1800s all of the area between the present Morrills and Woodfords was a flat empty place called Stevens Plains. Stevens Plains remained a part of Westbrook until 1871 when it broke off to become the Town of Deering and later joined with the City of Portland. Up until that time this was an important business area of Westbrook.

In 1798 Zachariah B. Stevens started a very successful tin shop on the Plains which bore his family name. Zachariah was a master craftsman who set the standard by which all Maine's artisans would become known throughout New England and the eastern seaboard. Soon he was employing hundreds of men and women, producing some of the most highly valued hand decorated tin ware in New England. (The women did much of the beautiful paintings on the tin ware.) Before many years passed, the entire Plains was a thriving industrial zone where New England's bustling tin and pewter manufacturing industry was born and grew. Zachariah Stevens became a successful businessman, was a Westbrook selectman from 1823 – 1837 and donated some of his land for Westbrook Seminary, later Westbrook College and now UNE.

Tin is the chief component of pewter and Britannia ware so it is not surprising that pewter shops sprang up in the same areas as tinsmith shops. Pewter is a metal alloy of tin and lead and is duller, darker, and softer than silver. When new or after polishing, pewter has its own special luster. Since it is not a precious metal it was fairly within the cost of most early American housewives. Some of the pewter made after 1840 had a slightly different composition and is called Britannia metal.

Four men who worked on Stevens Plains have emerged as skilled pewter makers. Their pieces are considered museum quality and are sought after by collectors. The Westbrook Historical Society is pleased to have in their collection, examples from three of these men.

Allen Porter, (1799-1862; working c. 1829-1842), arrived in Westbrook in 1829. He went to work for Zachariah Steven learning the tin and pewter trade. He soon became a skilled pewter smith and in 1835 he entered into partnership with his brother Freeman. They had a successful business together until Allen returned to Hartford, CT in 1838. He is known for his tea and coffee pots and lighting devices. [He is the only one of

the four who is not buried in Pine Grove Cemetery, Portland*.]

Freeman Porter, (1808-1887; work c. 1832-1860), arrived in Westbrook in 1832. After his brother Allen returned to CT, Freeman continued to run the business and to make his home on Stevens Plains. He became a successful businessman and upstanding member of the community. He served as Westbrook town selectman in 1868. Freeman made tea and coffee pots, lighting devices, a wide variety of pitchers and is known today for producing good cider pitchers.

Rufus Dunham, (1815-1893; work c. 1837-1861), studied the pewter making business first in Boston, then in Poughkeepsie NY. He settled in Westbrook in 1837 and opened his own shop on the Plains. Using steam power and a good-sized crew, he became the hardest, longest working and most prolific of all the pewter makers, producing "4000 tea pots, 1000 pitchers, 600 coffee pots and 1,000 gross of spoons per year". His rise to wealth and prominence made him a person of note in the community. He was one of the founders of Pine Grove Cemetery*, donated a large amount of money to build the All Souls Universalists Church on the Plains and was a trustee of Westbrook Seminary. Rufus is known for his tall teapots and candlesticks, but is best known for cider pitchers. [Rufus is the only one of the four whose work is not in the Society's collection.]

Elizur B. Forbes, (1813-1884; work c. 1846-1862), is the least known of the four. Born in E. Granville, MA, he married in Hartford, CT. He moved from Hartford to Stevens Plains in 1840 to become foreman at the Porter Company. In the census of 1850 he is listed as a Britannia worker and 10 years later as a pewterer. Little is known of his career as a pewter smith. He apparently marked only a small number of pewter objects, mostly pitchers or teapots, which may account for the lack of written history. For this reason alone, the Society is very pleased that it recently came into possession of one of his fine pitchers.



[*Pine Grove Cemetery, Portland, is behind UNE and appears today as a section of Evergreen Cemetery.]

- Historical Society Happenings -

PROGRAMS:

MARCH 4, 2009: Thomas Madsen, past president of the Pewter Collectors of America, Inc. will present a program on AMERICAN PEWTER. He will focus on Stevens Plains pewter so, if you have a piece of Westbrook or American pewter, please bring it to share.

QUESTIONS:

Information requested via e-mail on the following subjects:

* **FORTIN:** Caroline Préfontaine (Fournier) married to Jean (John) A. **FORTIN** of Westbrook 1870; children Flora and Ovide. Ovide married Alexina Guimond and had children Robert and Leo Fortin

* **HASKELL**, Nathaniel born 1759 in Westbrook; granted land in Moosehead and settled Greenville, ME. Daughter Deborah married John **WALDEN**.

* **BETHANY HALL CHURCH**, looking for any information on the founding and history of the church.

* **ROCKY HILL SCHOOL** students from 1944–1946; Joe Foss is seeking classmates to share photos and memories.

If you have any information on any of the above, please contact the Society at 207-854-5588 or info@westbrookhistoricalsociety.org

ASSESSIONS:

Recent Gifts to the Society:

LP of John Gooch Night - Mar 20, 1962

“Surprise Band of 100 Pieces” - recorded by Event Records (Al Hawkes’ studio)

E. B. Forbes pewter pitcher

Rudy Vallee memorabilia, including a sterling silver cigarette case with initials R.V. and USCG insignia

WEBSITE:

The Society’s website has initiated queries from the following states and countries. Historical Society volunteers search for the requested information and photos and answer each query promptly. (Thanks to each and every one of these wonderful, dedicated people who give freely of their time and knowledge!)

States : AK, CA, CO, CT, DE, FL, GA, IL, KY, MA, ME, MD, MN, NC, NH, NY, OH, PA, TN, TX, VA, VT, WA

Countries: Australia, England, Canada, Thailand, Panama

NEWSLETTER EDITOR WANTED – must be able to use a computer; no other experience needed!

The Westbrook Historical Society mourns
the loss of member
GEORGIA STEED THERIO
On September 17, 2008

The following article was submitted by Eleanor Saunders. It came from her Conant Collection of Scrapbooks. The article was written up in the Westbrook American’s *Ramblings* column on February 24, 1988. Anne Foote was the author.

July 3, 1805 Westbrook Girl Sails With Peary



Mamie Babb moved from New York to Westbrook after the death of her mother. She lived with her aunt and uncle, Dr. and Mrs. Jacob Horr, in a large home on the corner of Stroudwater and Main Street. (Dr Horr was mayor of Westbrook in 1900-1901. Their house was torn down in 1934 to make way for an Esso Station; Cumberland Farms is now on that corner.)

An article from the *New York World* of July 3, 1905 tells of Lieut. Matthew Peary arriving in New York harbor from Bucksport, Maine on his ship, the Roosevelt. This was the first stop on his way to explore the North Pole. Accompanying Lieut. Peary on the expedition were Mrs. Peary, their young son Robert and his nursemaid, Mamie Babb...from Westbrook, Maine!

After returning from the Arctic Mamie married Oscar Fick Sr. in 1908. Oscar was a long time executive at the SD Warren Co. They spent their life in Westbrook and had a son, Oscar Fisk, Jr.

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- Byron Dyer
Secretary- Rowena Walton
Treasurer- Nancy Joy Curran

Directors

Diane Turgeon Dyer – Beverly Marion
Alwyn Waite – James Burrill

Email address

info@westbrookhistoricalsociety.org

Webpage

www.westbrookhistoricalsociety.org

Tel: 207-854-5588

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

Westbrook Historical Society
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Westbrook, ME 04092

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Meeting: Wednesday, March 4@ 1:30 PM
Program: American Pewter