



PRESERVING THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE

From The President

I hope that you enjoy our special winter newsletter.

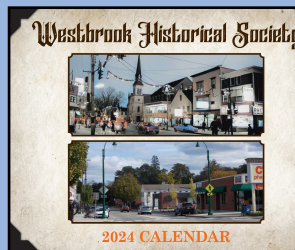


It was an exciting and busy year for the society, hosting special guest speakers, conducting bus and walking tours with the Bucket Brigade, and dedicating a new historical marker at the site of the Underground Railroad on Main Street. In addition, I completed two new books, "Westbrook Memories" and "Westbrook More Memories," that are currently at the printers. We also have a new 2024 calendar, that is now available, perfect for a holiday gift.

As the new year approaches, we foresee challenges and growth opportunities. We're gearing up to tackle projects and will be looking for volunteers to help us achieve our goals. Stay tuned for more information.

Wishing you a joyful holiday season and a new year filled with safety, health, and prosperity. ...Mike

NEW



Available Now

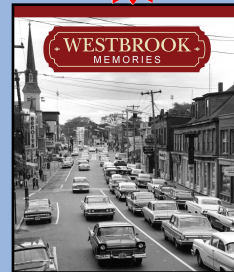
**Historical Society
2024 Calendar**

**\$17.99 plus shipping
\$14.99 Member Price
plus shipping**

Bundles

**Purchase any 3
or more and save \$5.00
Members save \$10.00**

NEW

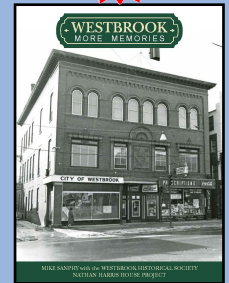


Available Soon

**Westbrook Memories Vol 1
Westbrook Memories Vol 2**

**\$33.99 plus shipping
\$31.99 Member Price
plus shipping**

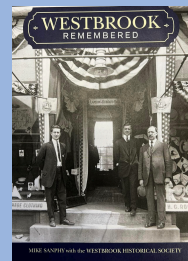
NEW



Still Available

**Westbrook
Remembered**

**\$27.99 plus shipping
\$24.99 Members
plus shipping**



Wishing Our First
Responders And
Public Works
Department A Safe
And Warm Winter

Early Morning Tragedy In Westbrook



On the morning of April 5, 1899, just before 8 AM, Westbrook was jolted by an explosion caused by the steam locomotive *Presumpscot*. The blast was heard nearly a mile away and resulted in damage to property, injuries, and loss of life. Engineer **James Bickford** succumbed to his injuries on the way to the Portland hospital. Fireman **John Eldridge** was killed instantly. Three boys playing near the train tracks suffered severe injuries from the escaping steam, while miraculously, no passengers in the two cars behind the engine were harmed.

The force of the explosion ejected the boiler pot into the air, landing on the second floor dormer of a house, setting curtains ablaze. Described at the time as one of the state's worst railroad accidents, the aftermath of the incident was captured in surviving photographs. Besides documenting the tragedy, they also give us a look at the people there that day as they gaze into the camera. They are gone now, but their images from 124 years ago are preserved forever - frozen in time

The pictures below show a group of people from two views near the locomotive. The one on the left is from the front, where it finally stopped two hundred feet from where it exploded. The second picture in the middle and a cropped and enlarged version of it far right was taken on the side of the wreckage, presumably by the same photographer. Interestingly, the same woman appears in both pictures. ...Mark Swett



WINTER SCENES IN THE CITY



Who Was Stephen Dresser?



During the graduation ceremonies of the WHS Class of 1917, three empty chairs draped with American flags stood as a poignant tribute. Among the absentees was **Stephen R. Dresser**, affectionately known as “Steve” by his peers. A bright and active student, he held various school roles, excelling in academics, theater, and sports, while showcasing talents in leadership and languages, particularly French.

World War I was raging overseas. **The Selective Service Act of 1917** required all men between the ages of 21 and 30 to register for the draft.

Dresser, a popular and promising young man, made a selfless choice just before his graduation. A month shy of completing his studies, he volunteered for the Army, leaving behind his plans for college and a career.

Principal **L.H. Conant (Brown)** excused the forty-one members of the senior class so they could see him off.

It was an emotional departure with hugs, handshakes, prayers and wishes of godspeed. He embarked on a journey embodying the lyrics, “*We won’t be back till it’s over, over there.*” But before that he had to come face-to-face with the motto; “*Prepare for the worse, hope for the best and take what comes.*”

As a Private in the Medical Corps ambulance, Dresser displayed remarkable courage on the Western and Italian fronts, earning praise from French officers for his heroism under fire. His valor was recognized with a *Croix de Guerre*, similar to the U.S. Bronze or Silver Star. **Gen. John J. Pershing** also acknowledged his bravery in a public dispatch.

On November 11, 1918 an armistice was signed and the “*war to end all wars*” was over.

Westbrook welcomed the “*doughboys*” back home. The festivities included a parade with people lining the streets, waving American flags, and cheering the hometown boys as they marched down Main Street, turned onto Bridge Street, and then down Brown Street.

Stephen Dresser did not return home. His whereabouts post-ceasefire suggested possible involvement in the American Occupation of Germany or continued service alongside France as an ally.

In late March, the War Department notified his parents that he had died in France on March 20, 1919. There were stories that he died from a broken arm, while another said it was the result of a car accident. To add to the mystery a typed military document states that he died on March 14, 1919 with a discharge date six days later on March 20, 1919. It also indicates that



he was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery on Rochester Street in Westbrook with an upright American Legion monument. There was no cause of death listed. However, there is another handwritten military document that states he died in France on March 14, 1919 and was buried in the **Suresnes American Military Cemetery** in *Suresnes, Hauts-de-Seine, France* among the over 1500 American Soldiers killed in World War I. The cause of death is listed as “*suicide.*”

Regardless of how Stephen Dresser’s life ended, he should be remembered as one of Westbrook’s heroes of WW I

Merci Stéphane pour votre service. ...Mark Swett



Sammy Porello's Million Dollar Smile

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITY

The Historical Society is looking for volunteers who can assist us with the reorganization of our display floor. With the new year at our doorstep, we are excited to start implementing a new phase of our work to grow our membership and to establish a larger presence within the community. The need to better use our floor space for displays and to grow our exhibits is part of the process. Whether you are a professional organizer, or someone who enjoys the challenge of reorganization, we would welcome your assistance. If you are interested, or have any questions, please reach out to our Board Member, Deb Shangraw at: shangrawd@outlook.com or by phone at: 207-329-9197.

Westbrook Restaurateur Sammy Porello Heads One-Man Anti-Crime Crusade

By ROBERT C. SHEPARD
Staff Reporter

WESTBROOK — Restaurateur Sammy Porello, who spent two years in jail as a young man, wants to sell his two restaurants here so he can devote his time to furthering the cause of the Anti-Crime Society of America.

He's president and the only member of the society which he founded in 1933. The society has been inactive for almost 30 years.

Porello's goal is to reduce crime by abolishing the parole system. He'd replace it with an in-jail merit system so that the convict could reduce his sentence behind bars and leave a free man.

He thinks the parole system encourages too many ex-convicts to return to crime.

UNDER PAROLE, he says, a man is half free and half slave. No one can live normally under this stigma, he maintains. A man should leave prison with his debt to society fully paid, he believes.

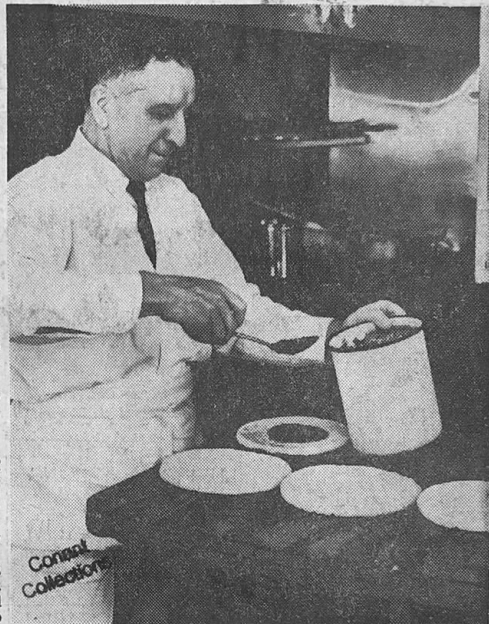
Parole tends to destroy a person's self respect, he says. An offender who stands a good chance of rehabilitation too often reverts to crime because of his forced existence as a halfcast, he believes.

Society shies from parolees, he says, and at the same time society won't let the parolee forget his mistake. Employers, for example, sometimes use this to blackmail a parolee into doing more than is expected from other employees, he says.

Porell also wants more individual attention given first offenders, with an eye toward rehabilitating them without jailing them.

HE REASONS THAT it's often less effective and more expensive to send a first offender to jail than to try to rehabilitate him outside the bars and without the stigma of a prison term.

Make Sure One Of These Is On Your Holiday List



Prefers Other Role

Westbrook restaurateur Sammy Porello fills pizza pie but would rather be filling a role as lecturer on the inadequacies of the parole system. (By Staff Photographer Johnson)

He says he doesn't have enough training to work out the details of either in-jail merit system or more individual attention for first offenders. These are jobs for criminologists and sociologists.

His job is to sell the basic ideas and to bring to the public's attention what he believes to be the fallacies of parole.

He hopes to do this by talking to as many service, fraternal and other groups as possible. He says he'll go anywhere to talk to anyone on the subject, and without fee.

He started lecturing when he founded the anti-crime society 30 years ago. But he ran into a stone wall because many persons ridiculed his beliefs.

PORELLO WAS convicted of arson in 1920 at the age of 17 and convicted of illegal possession of alcohol in 1930. He served about a year in confinement on both convictions. He readily admits the first crime but still maintains his innocence in the alcohol conviction.

In 1920 he operated a trucking business and burned down his barn for insurance money. He says he didn't realize the seriousness of this crime. He says he felt that if he were caught the only punishment

would be that he wouldn't be paid the insurance.

In 1930 authorities allegedly found alcohol in a teapot in the kitchen of his restaurant.

Porello says his theories on reducing crime stem from his experiences after his convictions.

"Many people promised to help me after I got out, but they didn't," he recalls.

He now feels he's justified in renewing his campaign because for 30 years he's proven he's a law abiding citizen.

HE SAYS SOCIETY must be told the dangers inherent in parole and hasty conviction of first offenders, and that he feels it's his duty to help others.

But Porello realizes that he doesn't face an easy job.

"It's hard to sell an idea like this. People aren't interested until someone close to them gets in trouble," he says.

PORELLO'S RESTAURANT GOING OUT
FOR SALE: TWO LOCATIONS, AND 19 BRIDGE S

The law will allow a new owner a coo at 180 Main St. Buy direct from owner for selling: To engage in anti-crime we created and founded the Anti-Crime



Riverbank Park Christmas 2022



We are thankful for our members, supporters and for the rich heritage that we have received from those who came before us.



There's no humbug in this newsletter, only good tidings of great joy for the wonderful memories of Westbrook's history.



Our goal for 2024 is to grow our membership, have a greater presence within the community, and to take you on exciting adventures traveling back through time.



Remembering

Westbrook's Santa Charlie Kilbride And Holiday Bell Ringer Harry Sproul



The S.D. Warren Santa



For adults, it is a cherished tradition, while for the young, it is magic. The Christmas season officially begins the week following Thanksgiving when the **S. D.**

Warren Santa makes his annual appearance illuminated by a spotlight,

with left arm in a motor-driven wave and a never-changing holiday smile greeting passersby.

For over sixty years, our Santa has been a part of Westbrook's holiday season, even during some of the most challenging times. He reminds us of the past by evoking memories of a simpler time that lives in our hearts. And he does it with a smile and a wave.

The Westbrook that Santa knew so long ago does not exist anymore. The people and business are gone. The buildings, most of which were in terrible condition, were demolished by *Urban Renewal* to modernize the city and to offer an alternative to the growing challenge of the "shopping mall." Though the intent was good the results were disastrous, almost reducing Westbrook to looking like a ghost town on the backlot of a movie set. Still, Santa did his holiday duty and continues to do it as Westbrook is seeing growth and expansion that was hard to imagine not long ago

Some think that Santa came from out of state. The truth is that the *S. D. Warren Mill* management asked an employee, **John McCurry**, to make a Santa large enough to be displayed outside for the holidays. He was a good choice not only because he had already drawn a lot of signs for the mill by freehand but also because he had worked at one time as an illustrator for *Disney Studios*.

Santa consists of four sheets of marine plywood cut to shape his head, chest, lower body, and left arm. John McCurry drew his face and other features and then hand-painted them. When we see him today, we are looking at the original colors, except for the waving arm that had suffered minor damage and needed repairs.

It was the responsibility of the roofing crew to set Santa up each year, but after a while, **Ed Dellinger** stepped in to do it. As time went on, the task passed to different people.

Of course, a public figure like our Santa has had a few issues. On one occasion, a telephone call notified the mill that he was lying on Cumberland Street and needed to be picked up and reset in his location. About ten years ago, he started falling apart. A steel frame now secures him and is visible on top of the building all year around.

Besides accidents, Santa has taken a little punishment from unknowns over the years, like bullet holes and things thrown trying to damage him. Even amid the attacks, he is resilient and keeps waving.

Santa has a few tiny handwritten messages for those who tried to hurt him. Where are they on him? What do they say? Who wrote them? It will remain a holiday mystery forever.

Those old enough may remember Santa on display in two other places at the mill - the #9 *Paper Machine* and the *Macintosh Building* between the dams by the bridge on Cumberland Street. His current and permanent location is on top of the old *Lithoplate Building* on corner of Cumberland and Main Street across from Maine Medical Partners. Look at him you are stepping back in time.

...Mark Swett



McLELLAN'S

These items could be purchased at McLellans as gifts or decorations for Christmas. How many can you remember?



Christmas Eve in Old Westbrook

It seems like yesterday. Christmas in Westbrook during the '50s and '60s was special, with the images of the businesses decorated in red and green lights, silver tinsel, and signs announcing holiday sales. Among them were Carr's Shoe Store, Lafond's, The Men's Shop, Day's Jewelry store, and McLellan's, We knew the owners' names and the people who worked there, but more importantly, they knew us too. We were a community in the real sense of the word.



Christmas was an exciting time. Children would flip past the clothes section of catalogs to search for the toys and circle everything they would like to have for Christmas. A boy might find a Revell car model kit with styrene plastic cement under the tree. And a girl would be able to cook like Mom with a Kenner Easy-Bake oven. It was a bit costly even in those days, but if you were lucky, Robert the Robert would be your new holiday friend. The lists of gifts they hoped Santa would deliver were neatly folded inside the billfolds and pocketbooks of their parents, who would do their best to buy, wrap, and put them under the tree to be found Christmas morning.

One of the sad realities of the holiday season are the people and families in need of assistance for the essential elements of life - food, clothes, and warmth. It is a problem compounded by their limited ability to buy and give to those they love at a time of year when it is encouraged to do so.

Although there were organizations to help the needy, one prominent local businessman wanted to do what he could for the less fortunate. He turned it into a group effort made up of local leaders in business, various companies, and even law enforcement. The goal was to make Christmas a joyous and festive occasion for as many as possible and without publicity.

Beginning in November, names were gathered, and a collective effort coordinated to gather essentials. Weeks were spent preparing, culminating in a covert delivery operation.

The process would take a few weeks to complete. After that, the only question was how the gifts would get to the locations. The answer was obvious. They would make the deliveries themselves.

As the holiday approached - as the song says - the feeling of Christmas was in the air. People seemed to be happier and a more courteous to one another. Harry Sproul wearing a hat with flaps covering his ears, stood in front of McLellan's in the snow and cold, ringing a bell to get donations for the Salvation Army bucket. The flurry of last-minute shoppers would descend upon the businesses. Kids would take the money they saved and buy their mother a little blue bottle of Evening in Paris cologne. Some fathers would get

a small plastic trophy that came with peel-off stickers with one that said - World's Greatest Dad." If all else failed, a box of Whitman's Sampler Chocolates from Valle's or Paine's pharmacy would complete the Christmas shopping.

After closing on Christmas Eve, some businesses would pull a bottle from a desk drawer and pour a drink of adult beverage to salute the holiday with co-workers. Even the Chief of Police would occasionally stop in on for a nip before heading home.

The stores would close early on Christmas Eve - some at 3:30 pm. It was a time to be with family and friends, keeping old traditions and starting new ones. You had to be sure you had what you needed because the city would close up shop. If you forgot something your next opportunity to get it would be December 26th.

At dusk on Christmas Eve, cars loaded with gifts would start the drive to make someone's Christmas a little brighter. Each driver had a list of names, addresses, and presents to drop off. They would stop in front of the house or apartment, place gifts on the porch, knock on the door and then leave quickly driving away into the night.

Similar acts unfolded in the neighboring cities of Gorham, Buxton, Standish, and South Windham. The collaborative endeavor Initiated by a single individual and supported by the Westbrook Business Community, impacted many lives during the Christmas season.

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Depending upon the need, they delivered a wide array of gifts, ranging from warm clothing, slippers, boots, mittens and food to toys and even essentials like oil for furnaces. Popular items included Magic Slates equipped with red plastic pencils for drawing on a plastic sheet, enabling users to erase and start over simply by lifting the sheet, Colorform playsets, dolls that shut their eyes when tilted, and Crayola Crayons along with coloring books,

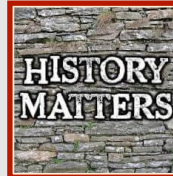
Parents may have had an idea about who delivered the gifts but they could not be sure. The kids were thankful that Santa had not forgotten them.

Those men are gone now. We will never know how many people they touched with their generosity. Someone reading this may have been a recipient of one of their Christmas miracles. Their names are still confidential today. I know who most of them are, but I am sworn to secrecy. There can be no better service to them than to

honor their wishes to remain anonymous today as they were then.

Perhaps we should continue their legacy in some small way by doing a little act of anonymous kindness for someone in need. And if we do, we will understand Christmas on a much deeper level. After all, isn't caring what it's all about? ...*Mark Swett*

MAKE A DONATION



Please support local history. We are a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. All contributions are tax-deductible.

NATHAN HARRIS HOUSE RECEIVES \$100,000 GRANT

The *Cornelia Warren Community Association* has generously approved a \$100,000 grant for the renovation of the historic *Nathan Harris House* located at 425 Main Street, Westbrook. These funds will be allocated to restoring and safeguarding the 1828 structure's exterior, primarily focusing on urgent needs like replacing the roof and repairing or replacing wood rot on the house's exterior walls. The renovation work commenced on November 6 and will continue until the wood rot repairs are completed.



Work Begins On The New Roof

The significance of this preservation work cannot be overstated. Too often, we have witnessed the loss of our exquisitely crafted historical buildings, resulting in the loss of their rich history and the stories of the individuals associated with them. Thanks to the approval of the Board of Directors of the *Westbrook, Maine Historical Society* and the faith of the donors and funders, we aim to restore beautiful house to its former glory, preserving the legacy of its occupants within the Westbrook community.

A heartfelt appreciation goes to *Ed Symbol, Sue Joyce, and the Board of Directors* for entrusting us to utilize *Cornelia Warren's* funds diligently and wisely.

The renovated house will serve as a venue for tours and presentations centered around Mr. Nathan Harris and his family, highlighting their connection to the Warren Family and our community. Furthermore, educational classes will be conducted for elementary school students to explore history and preservation, while efforts will be made to engage Junior High and High School Students, emphasizing the importance of preservation. Older students are encouraged to participate in the tours and educational programs to incorporate community service volunteerism. Stay updated on the progress through the Nathan Harris

House Facebook page and the Westbrook Maine, Historical Society Facebook page.

For donations and further information, please contact our Project Manager, Deb Shangraw, at:

shangrawd@outlook.com, or leave a message at the Historical Society 207-854-5588.



Deb Shangraw

Holiday Message From Chief Engineer Clyde Chapman



The Officers of the **Westbrook Historical Society Bucket Brigade** would like to wish all of our members and supporters a very Merry Christmas, Joyous Holidays and a Happy and Healthy New Year!

In just a short year since we formed the Bucket Brigade we have made major strides in growing our membership base and providing opportunities to our members and the public to learn about our proud and fascinating history of Westbrook Public Safety.

Next year, we plan to continue this momentum and would like to double our membership, which currently stands at about 140 members. We also are looking at some new and exciting events and programs for 2024, to include participating in *Westbrook Together Days*, A Bucket Brigade Trivia and Old Timer's Night. We are looking into sponsoring bus tours of neighboring Historical Societies and a visit to the Portland Fire Museum. We will also have opportunities for you to get involved in a direct way by helping us inventory and maintain our extensive public safety collection.

Our Fire Safety Program for Kids has proven to be very successful and is going strong.

These and other programs that are in the works have come from your suggestions and comments and we encourage you to keep telling us what other events or programs you would like to see from your Historical Society Bucket Brigade.

The Westbrook, Maine Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. As the New Year approaches, I encourage you to consider a tax-deductible donation to our Westbrook Historical Society Bucket Brigade. Memorial donations are also a nice way to remember a friend or family member and will help us continue to improve the Bucket Brigade and expand our activities.

In closing, I'd like to wish you and your families a Happy and Safe Holiday Season.

Clyde R. Chapman Chief Engineer
Westbrook Historical Society Bucket Brigade
426 Bridge Street Westbrook Maine 04092

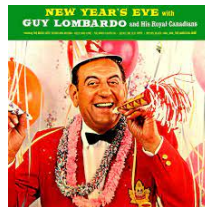




In 2024, the *Westbrook, Maine Historical Society* marks its 48th anniversary. Since our inception, significant changes have occurred, from our initial location to our vast archive collections. If you haven't visited us yet, the upcoming year presents a perfect opportunity. Our enthusiastic staff and volunteers eagerly share Westbrook's rich history with our visitors. Our goals for 2024 include expanding our membership, fostering a stronger community presence, and guiding you on thrilling journeys back in time.

For those who cherish the nostalgia of yesteryears, New Year's Eve once resonated with the melodies of **Guy Lombardo** and his orchestra. The cherished tradition of bidding farewell to the old year and welcoming the new, accompanied by the familiar strains of "*Auld Lang Syne*," is a treasured memory.

Remember those moments? Click on the picture to relive this timeless tune and transport yourself back for two heartfelt minutes. Perhaps it will evoke a reminiscent tear or two, much like the cherished history of Westbrook—a memory that lives on.



IMPORTANT NOTICE



Starting in June 2024 membership dues will increase to \$15.00 per year. If you are 65 or older they will remain at \$10.00

Starting in January 2024 there will be a cost of \$8.00 for non-members who want to attend the programs of our guest speakers

Currently only members receive our quarterly newsletters. Starting January 1, 2024 non-members will be able to purchase them for \$5.00 each.

To all our valued members, we extend warm wishes for a joyful, prosperous, and healthy new year.



We'd love to hear from you
westhistorical@myfairpoint.net