

Venture Smith: Path to Redemption with Nancy Steenberg

On April 22nd, Nancy Hathaway Steenberg's presentation will analyze the life experiences of Venture Smith, also known as Broteer Furro, both as a slave in Stonington, Connecticut in the mid 1700s and as a free African man in Connecticut from the 1760s until his death in 1805.

Ms. Steenberg will discuss the minority community in Southeastern Connecticut and evaluate legal records of Venture's various encounters with Connecticut's legal system as he made his way to freedom. Though few whites respected Venture's rights either as a man, as a property owner, or as a businessman, Venture appears to have had an abiding faith in the law and the concept of justice. His willingness to resort to the courts rather than to use violence marks him as a man of "high respectability and usefulness" despite his lack of education. Venture's experiences reveal that slavery was as much of a blot on colonial Connecticut as on Southern colonies, but that Venture, by his own endeavors, triumphed over the racism of early Connecticut.



Nancy Hathaway Steenberg is a local resident and Adjunct Professor in History and Bachelor of General Studies Director at the University of Connecticut-Avery Point. She graduated from Radcliff College; Harvard University with an A.B. in History; Trinity College with a M.A. in American History and the University of Connecticut with a Ph.D. in History.

Please note that this April 22 membership meeting, which is open to the public at no cost, will be held at 7:30 pm in the Mystic Congregational Church Sanctuary instead of the usual Parish Hall due to a church Tag Sale function slated for the next day.

A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa: But Resident Above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related by Himself. Printed in New London by C. Holt at the Bee-Office. 1798.

Courtesy of the New London County Historical Society, New London, CT

They Called Me Lizzy

Release from Kathleen O'Beirne

On Tuesday, May 12, the Mystic Congregational Church Women's Fellowship will offer a 12:30 p.m. luncheon plus performance of a one-woman show: "They Called Me Lizzy.....From Slavery to the White House." This is the true life story of Elizabeth Keckly, who was best known as the dressmaker to Mary Todd Lincoln and author of *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. The production is written & directed by Kandie Carle and produced by the East Haddam Stage Company. It stars Stephanie Jackson as "Lizzy" Keckly.

Born into slavery in 1818, Lizzy managed to purchase her freedom and make her way to Washington, D.C., where her dressmaking skills and entrepreneurial savvy brought her to the attention of several political families. When Mary Todd Lincoln learned of her reputation, she

hired Lizzy immediately and thus began a relationship that would forever change both their lives.

Not only did Lizzy perform her duties for Mrs. Lincoln, but in her own right, created the Contraband Relief Association to aid the newly freed slaves pouring into D.C. Through her church and community, Keckly helped found the Home for Destitute Colored Women and Girls - which would play a key role in her final years. Her story reminds us of the difference one person can make.



Stephanie Jackson as Elizabeth Keckly.

The Mystic Congregational Church is at 43 E. Main Street, Mystic. Tickets are available by mail in advance for \$20.00 and, space permitting, at the door for \$25.00. All proceeds will go to local charities. For further information, please call 860-536-4259.



from the PRESIDENT'S DESK

Lou Allyn

One of the pleasures of working in a local historical society is to see how one thing leads to another when you are tracking down the answer to a question. Since everyone loves a good story I thought that this month I would tell you this one.

I write little articles about Masons Island history for the Property Owners Newsletter. A few months back I asked readers for topics they would like to know more about. Hugh McGee responded with several good ideas, one of which was the old Masons Island one-room schoolhouse which was – not surprisingly – located on Schoolhouse Road.

Just as I started to do some research an article by Carol Kimball about Georgie Fulton appeared in *The New London Day!* (I can't really say this was a case of great minds etc. but serendipity is always a good thing.) Georgie was a teacher at the school and lived on Old North Road for many years. (A portrait of her by Herb Stoops hangs between the second floor books shelves in the Mystic Noank Library.)

Anyway, during a series of emails to and from Carol, she asked if I knew anything about a story Georgie Fulton reportedly told about Archie Chapman. Supposedly Archie, who owned a house on Masons Island down the road from Georgie, was an orphan whose parents drowned in 1895 when crossing the Ridingway Bridge. And by the way “where was his house located?”

I found the location of the Chapman house on one of the maps in Dad's book *Major John Masons GREAT ISLAND* and found deeds in the Stonington Town Hall tracing the sales of this property over the generations.

Dorrie Hanna got interested in the project and searched the 1890 census and found Reuben T. Chapman, born March 1846 and married in 1877 to Rose A. Since the 1910 census also shows Reuben and Rose alive and well, it is clear that they did not drown in 1895. But where did Georgie's story come from?

In one of those “isn't it a small world events” it turns out that John W. and Mary R. Chapman were once owners of Dorrie Hanna's house on West Mystic Avenue and both died on the same day in 1928. Like the childhood game of gossip, two Chapmans dying on the same day in 1928 became Archie's parents drowning on Masons Island together 33 years earlier.

I should also mention that searches in the Mystic Noank Library PDF files of old local newspapers yielded various interesting news items about Chapman weddings, fish catches, walking across the ice to Mystic for Sunday papers, etc.

In conclusion I would like to ask that any reader who can add to this story contact me.



“Lake to Sea” image from a brochure published by the Masons Island Company in 1914 - from www.masonsland.com

Mystic River Historical Society Mission Statement

The Society exists to collect, arrange, exhibit and preserve records, papers, photographs, artifacts, relics and related archival materials that document the history of the people who lived in the area around the Mystic River from the first settlement in 1654 to the present.

Officers:

*President - Lou Allyn • Vice President - John Porter
Treasurer - Bill Everett • Corresponding Secretary - Kit Werner • Recording Secretary - Cathy Marco*

*The Newsletter of the Mystic River Historical Society is published monthly, September through May, with a combined issue for November and December, by the Mystic River Historical Society • Box 245 Mystic, CT 06355
Back issues of the newsletter are available for online viewing at www.mystichistory.org*



ALL HANDS on DECK! - VOLUNTEER CORNER

House Docents & Cookie Bakers Needed!

- Joyce Everett

Please contact any one of us on the house tour committee if you can help as a house docent for the tour. You will be hosting at one of our historic Mystic homes for one two-hour shift only and it is always a fun time.

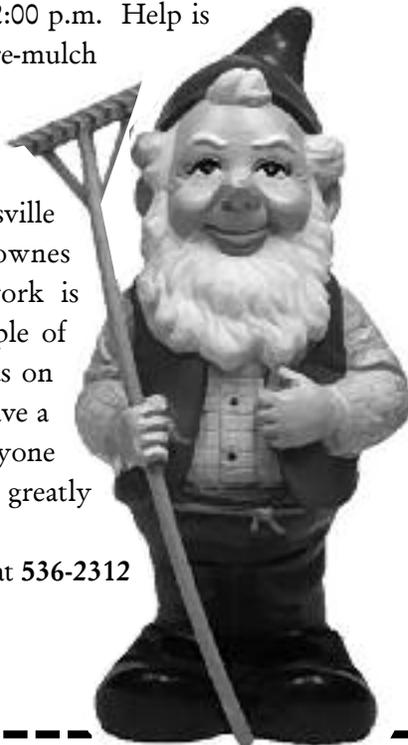
If you are able to make cookies please plan to make 3 dozen medium sized cookies of whatever kind you like to be delivered or picked up before the house tour. Please call Joyce Everett at 536-6339 if you have questions or email jeverett38@aol.com.

Volunteers Needed for Annual Spring Cleanup

- John Porter

The annual Mystic River Historical Society Grounds Cleanup Day will be held on **Saturday, April 25th** from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Help is needed to clean-up and re-mulch the beds, rake out the driveway gravel and generally clean-up up the property around Portersville Academy and the Downes Building. Often our work is completely within a couple of hours because of all hands on deck helping out. We have a variety of jobs for everyone and everyone's help is greatly appreciated.

Please call **John Porter** at 536-2312 to volunteer to assist.



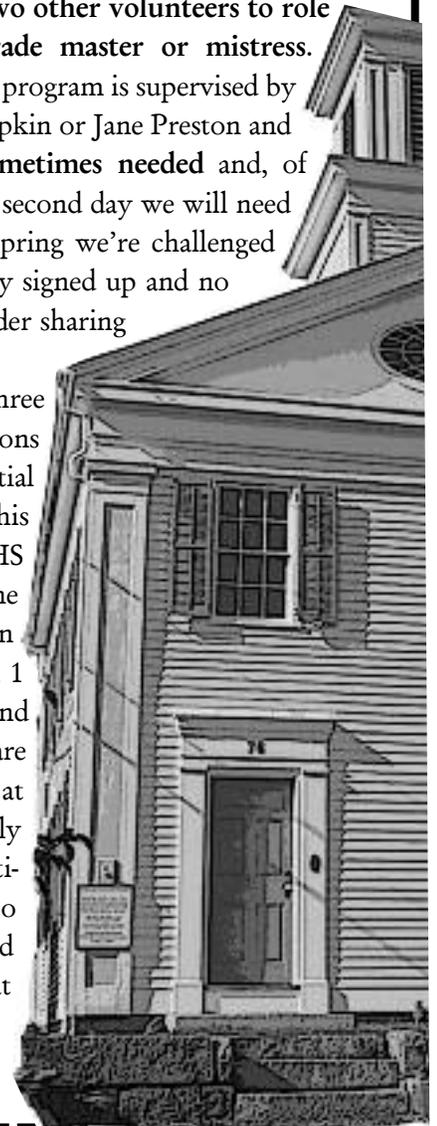
Help 9:30 Scholars at PVA

A dillar, a dollar, a volunteer with scholars...

We need help from our members! We offer programs for First and Third Grades from local schools for six weeks in May and June. Third and First Grades come on Tuesday and Thursday mornings from 9:30 to 11:30. We can accommodate 2 classes with a maximum of 24 children and 3 adults per class. The 3rd Grade program is *Homelife in the 19th Century* and the 1st Grade program is *Families at Sea*. These programs include take-home craft projects, illustrated stories, hands-on activities and interesting glimpses of life in Mystic more than 150 years ago.

Presently Tim Evers as Mr. Avery is the schoolmaster for the 3rd grades and Jane Brannegan as Miss Palmer is the schoolmistress for the 1st grades. **Both need to have understudies.** We'd like to be able to offer a second day a week, **but would need two other volunteers to role play a 3rd and 1st grade master or mistress.** Downstairs the 3rd grade program is supervised by Joyce Everett and Bill Topkin or Jane Preston and Lou Allyn, **subs are sometimes needed** and, of course, if we are to add a second day we will need more volunteers. This spring we're challenged with three schools already signed up and no volunteers - please consider sharing your time and talents!

We have scheduled three orientation/training sessions for our present & potential volunteers for anyone this fun, educational MRHS outreach endeavor. The sessions will be on Tuesday afternoons from 1 to 3 on April 14th, 21st and 28th. All volunteers are requested to attend at least one and preferably more sessions. Please notify Nancy McKay as to which days you will attend at 536-8531 or at nancmck@sbcglobal.net.



March 2009 Meeting Minutes

- Cathy Marco

The Board of Trustees of the Mystic River Historical Society met at the Mystic Chamber of Commerce on Monday, March 16, 2009. Board members present were Lou Allyn, David Evans, Tim Evers, Bill Everett, Joyce Everett, Sally Halsey, Jim Kimenker, Cathy Marco, Betty O'Donnell, Jane Preston, John Porter, Stephanie Thorp and Kit Werner.

President (Lou Allyn): At the well attended historical expo at the Family History Center on March 14th, we handed out copies of our Portersville Press to interested parties. On Sunday, May 3rd, we will have an Appreciation Reception for our Patrons at Judy Hick's house from 4:00 - 6:00pm. The next Board meeting is April 20th. The next Membership meeting is March 25th in the Sanctuary of the church (since something is going on in the Church Hall).

Treasurers Report (Bill Everett): Other than some format changes in the reports, nothing remarkable is going on with our monies.

Corresponding Secretary (Kit Werner): There were four letters of thanks sent this past month: 1 for a donation related to membership renewals and to newsletter patrons; 1 for a donation to the Mary Jobe Ackley Trust; 1 to Jason Mancini, our speaker at our February meeting; and 1 miscellaneous.

STANDING COMMITTEES

Building & Grounds (John Porter): The Annual Grounds Cleanup day is April 25th starting at 9. Often our work is completely within a couple of hours because of all hands on deck helping out. We have a variety of jobs for everyone and everyone's help is greatly appreciated.

Curatorial (Dorrie Hanna, Collection Manager): The Curatorial Committee met earlier today. We discussed the Family History Expo, dispersal of items not in support of our Mission Statement, and other topics. Since last month we have received two donations of multiple items. One relates to the development of the Seaport Heights subdivision and the other contains material from the late Dr. Thurman Maine's family, who was a well known Mystic personality.

Lou reported that certain donated monies (i.e. monies given in honor of a birthday) were discussed and it was decided to purchase genealogical books. This is being researched.

Lou made a motion to apply for a Rotary Club grant for monies (approx. \$336) for an upgrade (called Virtual Exhibit) to PastPerfect. Lou's motion was seconded, and it passed unanimously.

Lou made a motion to spend \$150 for a workshop relative to the Transcription Club for Donna Baron. Lou's motion was seconded, and it passed unanimously.

Jane Preston is going to put together regular historical articles for Portersville Press. Sally asked to receive copies of these to send to Zip06 (the web site for the Times weekly papers in SE CT).

Education (Tim Evers): We now have email addresses for the appropriate contacts at the local elementary schools. Dorrie sent emails to those on our list and we now have four schools requesting spring dates to visit Portersville Academy. These visits will take place in May and June with six Tuesdays for third graders and four Thursdays for first graders. Because classes are larger in some schools (i.e. Deans Mill) and we are limited to no more than 38 attendees at Portersville, we can no longer accommodate the entire class but need to divide it up into three.

We need help from our members! On four Thursdays we need volunteers at Portersville Academy for our first grade visits. If anyone can help on any of these days, please contact Tim: May 7, May 28, June 4, or June 11. We will solicit support at our next general meeting.

Outreach: Lou asked some organizations if they had a need to have assistance with their archives and, ultimately, save more Mystic history. Two organizations have shown interest, The Mystic Chamber of Commerce and the Nature Center, which we will be working with.

Finance (David Evans) & Hospitality (Cindy Allyn): Nothing to report

IT Committee (Stephanie Thorp): Barry performed the monthly system update and file backup tasks on February 28 and March 1. All systems appeared to be in good operating condition and were functioning normally. Updates included Windows XP, Microsoft Office, McAfee Internet Security, and Past Perfect. Barry's detailed reports are available on request. Barry also investigated a Computer System Incident Report, #0003, of McAfee Error Report related to a normal update. After examining the McAfee incident log and retrying the update, he determined that the problem was a McAfee hiccup and that the retry was successful.

Stephanie updated the website to include the March Portersville Press and a new page for the house tour, Rooms & Blooms, as well as updating the Events Calendar.

Our computers are 3-5 years old and we need to be aware of perhaps updating them updated within a few years (as specified in our IT plan).

Marketing (Sally Halsey): Releases have been sent announcing our upcoming monthly program, and added it to lots of e-calendars as well as Zip06. Many articles have been sent regarding our House and Garden tour (see House Tours report).

Membership (Cynthia Allyn): We have one new renewal member--Bernie Boylan. Renewal letters will be sent to everyone around April 1st.

Nominating (Tim Evers): We are looking for a Recording Secretary to replace Kit whose term has expired.

Program (Paul Ingle): Frederick Burdick is our speaker for the March 25th membership meeting. The talk will be "Mystic River Area Burial Grounds and Stone Carvers". The April membership meeting is April 22nd.

Special Events (Joyce Everett): We currently have 25 participants for the New York City Trip on April 24 and 25. As long as there are hotel rooms available we can add an additional 5 people until April 1st.

House Tours (Sally Halsey and Joyce Everett): There will be a meeting for all house Chairmen at 5:00p on May 7th at Joyce Everett's house, 1 Prospect Street. We will check on any problems, coordinate ways of preparing information for the docents, and find out who still needs help getting docents. Joyce will be at the general meeting this month with her clipboard to collect more volunteer names.

Hartford Courant ran a small news release last Sunday, so people have been buying tickets on-line and calling. Cape Cod Life is doing an article, as is Shore Publishing (we've given both of them more info and photos). Tickets are here, we encourage all of you to take 10 or more to sell. Please record the name and ticket number of who buys them for our records. Paypal is up and running: Barbara Washburn and Sally Halsey have authorization to transfer money to the checking account, and Cam Bertsche can access the history and ticket buyers info. Posters will be ready on Friday, so we hope to get some around town before the Parade on Sunday. Postcards are in the works (they'll be used for promotional hand-outs as well as be sent to specific people). We'll place an ad in the Green Sheet (Federated Garden Club of CT) as well as in the Groton Rec program (due in homes mid-May). We'll send

this ad to other historical societies, as well, for their ease of use.

Walking Tour (David Evans): A few hotels have asked for more copies of the walking tour. David will ask the Chamber for help with getting more copies.

OLD BUSINESS

By-Law Change to Article III: Lou spoke with Bill Tompkins about the last by-laws revisions and to learn anything pertaining to discussions of extending term limits in case of extenuating circumstances. Bill said that having "new blood" is vital to the organization and was the reason for adding term limits during the last update. So far the Mystic Historical Society has done well in recruiting energetic and dedicated people for its board, and even during difficult times there has been success with finding qualified board members. Cathy agreed not to continue this issue at this time and it will be addressed when the next by-laws review is done.

Next Board meeting is April 20, 2009. The next General Membership Meeting is March 25th.

*Respectfully submitted,
Cathy Marco,
Recording
Secretary*

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CALENDAR Notables

Membership Meeting Wednesday, April 22, 7:30p
Mystic Congregational Church Hall, 13 Broadway
Nancy Hathaway Steenberg presents "Venture Smith: Path to Redemption"

PVA Volunteer Training Tues, April 14, 21, 28, 1-3p
Present & potential volunteers for anyone this fun, educational MRHS outreach endeavor. The sessions will be on Tuesday afternoons from 1 to 3 on April 14th, 21st and 28th. All volunteers are requested to attend at least one and preferably more sessions. Contact Nancy McKay at 536-8531 or at nancmck@sbcglobal.net

Annual Grounds Cleanup Day Sat., April 25, 9a-12
Portersville Academy & Downes Building, 74 High St.
Please call John Porter 536-2312.

Membership Meeting & Pot Luck Wed., May. 27, 6p
No Membership Meeting in June

Rooms & Blooms Sat., June 20, 2009
A Mystic House and Garden Walk! Tickets are \$30 on the day of the event, or \$22 in advance, at Bank Square Books, The Whalers Inn or online or mail-in order at www.mystichistory.org Pre-purchased tickets allow holders to begin their tour at any property without the wait!

Volunteer opportunities available - call Joyce 536-6339.
For advertising possibilities - call Dorrie at 536 - 4453.



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We appreciate the support of our 2008-09 Newsletter Patrons in covering the costs of the Portersville Press.

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Membership Updates

- Cindy Allyn, Membership Chair

Recent membership renewals include:
Individual - Mr. Bernie Boylan, Mrs. Joan Smith

Rooms & Blooms House Tour Plans Blossom

- Sally Halsey

Mystic House & Garden Tour plans are coming along nicely with 13 properties to be featured along the west bank of the Mystic River. During the month of June, in conjunction with the Tour, the Mystic & Noank Library will feature a gallery of photos from the MRHS collection as well as new photos taken by Alan Brush. The Mystic Arts Center will also be displaying Mystic artists' works in the Schuster Gallery in June. Please support these community events by attending the exhibits and the tour!

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