

THE MYSTIC RIVER HISTORICAL SOCIETY: OUR FIRST 40 YEARS



RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN BY
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An alarm is sounded. Precious historical items are in peril. Patriots begin to meet, and on September 24, 1973, the Mystic River Historical Society is born. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, and stimulate interest in, our heritage.

How this almost penniless group arranged to: get temporary storage space in the Mystic & Noank Library; acquire and renovate Portersville Academy; conduct innovative money-raising projects; construct the Downes archives building; open the collections it acquired to the public; present regular, free programs on a variety of subjects; organize bus tours; publish a newsletter as well as other historical materials, and offer many school activities, is related in this brief history.

*Richard Semeraro
MRHS Board Member*

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About the author ~ Patricia M. Schaefer usually spends her writing time in the eighteenth century, especially with *The Diary of Joshua Hempstead 1711-1758*. Her book, *A Useful Friend: A Companion to the Joshua Hempstead Diary 1711-1758*, won the Homer Babbidge Award for the best work on Connecticut history in 2009. She found writing the MRHS history to be a nice change from her current project of proofreading the printed diary against the manuscript..

Editor's note ~ Dates in parentheses refer to Board Minutes or Newsletter issues.

The Mystic River Historical Society is a thriving organization with a membership of close to 400 that “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,” according to its current mission statement. Once those materials are preserved and accessioned into the computer, they are used to answer queries from individuals and organizations about Mystic’s past. Besides its collection activities, there are monthly programs for adults, interactive programs for school groups at Portersville Academy, published walking tours, bus trips, and a newsletter published six times a year, for starters.

How did this come about? What prompted some people in Mystic to decide they needed to start an historical society? How has it changed through the years, and what has stayed the same? A 40th anniversary is a good time to look back. It is not such a long stretch of time that no one remembers the beginning, but long enough for the world to have changed in some significant ways.

AT THE BEGINNING

When an organization has been part of the fabric of a community for forty years, it is hard to remember a time when it did not exist. Barbara Jensen, in her memoir *Mystic: Memories of a Native*, recalls the early 1970s, when the Mystic Junior Women’s Club “was busily doing research on the old historic houses in Mystic. They . . . began to realize that much of the information of an historical nature was becoming lost or destroyed. Once in a while a house with an attic full of treasures such as letters, diaries, newspaper clippings, or old photographs would be sold and the new owner would truck to the dump the attic ‘clutter.’” People “realized that this was destroying the history of Mystic’s past, but the new owner. . . had no place to record or store the memorabilia.” As Joyce Everett wrote in the September, 1997 MRHS newsletter:

We owe the Mystic Junior Women's Club a great debt because their effort to plaque the old houses made residents aware of the records that were being lost every year, the memories that were lost with each older resident who passed away, and the varied heritage of the town of Mystic. A small group of us began to discuss what we could do and it did not take long to decide that a Mystic historical society was what was needed.

That "small group" began to meet in 1972, and interest grew quickly. In June of 1973 a meeting at Bill and Joyce Everett's house set up the organization and chose a name. Warren Fish and Peter Stuart wrote the original bylaws. On July 3rd the "committee to organize an opening exhibit of Mystic memorabilia" started meeting, and on September 24th the "first meeting of the Mystic River Historical Society, Inc." was held at the Mystic Art Association. The exhibit opened at 7:30, at 8:30 the first annual meeting to elect the first trustees was held, and the trustees followed with their own first meeting. Arthur Maxson was elected president and William Downes vice-president. (JE's summary 1976) Like many new organizations, the society did not have much in the treasury. "The Board agreed that the Society would send a donation to the Mystic Art Gallery for the use of their building when the Society was more solvent." But Joyce Everett announced the Society "had been given temporary storage space for acquisitions on the second floor of the library," (Bd.9/73) so there was now an alternative to the dump for homeowners' "attic clutter."

By the next month's Board meeting the Society had received a gift of \$100 from the Charles B. Allyn Foundation, and had \$190 in the treasury. They agreed to contribute \$25 ("after some discussion") to the Art Association for the use of their building. Joyce Everett's suggestion that the Society start a newsletter, however, was tabled after discussion.

A special membership meeting was needed in December to change the bylaws because more committees were needed than the original bylaws allowed. Other questions about procedures had arisen by then, and there was a consensus that a group was needed to go over the bylaws. (Bd.12/73) There were more questions in January

of 1974 about combining the Junior Women's heritage committee with the Society, and what kind of building would be appropriate for MRHS and what its purpose would be. Bill Peterson reported that the accessions had all been written down and given a number. A project of telling the story of the local area in maps was approved. The January regular meeting was attended by 240 people. Richard Arms spoke on "Aspects of Architectural Preservation of Mystic," using two screens to show before and after slides of various buildings and homes in the area.

At the March Board meeting Elissa Wright, from the Town of Groton, came to see if the Society would support the town renovating the First District Hall and letting groups use it. The Board consensus "was that the building should be preserved and made useful." It was voted that Rick Arms should be appointed to look into renovating the building and the funds needed. By the May meeting, it was agreed that the Society should do more than that. "In the discussion that followed, the 1st District Hall seemed to be the answer to the Society's need for its headquarters and a display and work area."

At the second annual meeting in September of 1974, Peter Stuart reminded everyone "that this was the last night for charter memberships." The MRHS had clearly hit the ground running.

PORTERSVILLE ACADEMY

Taking on the renovation of the First District Hall was a major step for a new organization, but enthusiasm for the project led to many willing workers. The results, it was thought, would be both the preservation and renovation of a piece of Mystic's history and a headquarters where archival materials could be stored, programs held, and changing exhibits highlight different facets of life in Mystic in earlier times.



Built in 1839 by Amos Clift for \$1,365.95, Portersville Academy was a replacement for a smaller schoolhouse just west of what is now Union Baptist Church. The new school, praised by New England's leading educator as the best schoolhouse but one in the county, was located north of Union Baptist church. It served the Groton Fifth School District, which was the area first known as Portersville, and later as Mystic River. The building was used as a school for a relatively short time. Mystic kept growing, and by 1855 the larger Mystic Academy had replaced it.

In 1887 the Town of Groton bought the building and moved it to its present site on South High Street. It was called, rather grandly, the "Town Hall of the First Voting District of the Village of Mystic River," and used for meetings, elections, and holding courts until 1958. At that point it was closed and ignored for several years.

By 1966 the Groton Town Council was considering a resolution to demolish the building. Concerned citizens protested, and it was agreed to lease the building for \$1 a year to the Mystic Valley Civic Association. They arranged for donations of materials and work to repair the clapboards and windows, and painted the structure. The Mystic Garden Club graded and landscaped the lot. The Mystic Junior Women's Club took over when the Civic Association could no longer care for the building. Several local organizations met there, including Boy Scout Troop 17 and the Mysticalligraphers.



When the Mystic River Historical Society officially assumed responsibility for the First District Hall on April 24, 1975, there was more to do than the physical jobs of carpentry and painting. The legal work was finished, but research into the building's original appearance, survey of the condition of the structure, cost estimates, getting bids, and dealing with the unexpected remained to be done. And, of course, there was the whole matter of raising the money. In June Bill Downes reported for building committee chair Peter Stuart that the estimated cost of the restoration

would be \$15,500. The Society would need to establish priorities of the items that needed to be done. (6/75)

Grants alone would not cover the renovation costs, and membership fees were quite low. An individual yearly membership cost just \$1 and the highest category of Benefactor, which included a life membership, cost \$100. (1/75) The Board decided to investigate putting the building on the National Register of Historic Places in the hopes that would make it easier to get funding.

The Society's first money-raising project, *The Story of One Corner of Connecticut in Fifteen Maps*, had begun with funding from the Rotary Club, the State Bicentennial Commission, and the towns. The rest of the needed money was lent interest free by Bill Downes, to be repaid as the map packets sold. (Bd. 1/75) The packets were selling well by August, with schools wanting multiple copies. By March of 1976 2,000 packets had been sold. (Bd.) The Society had already voted in September of 1975 to give a life membership to Bill Downes "in recognition of his service to the society." This was to be far from the end of his work for the MRHS. He became co-chair of the building committee in June of 1976. (Bd.6/16/76)

Also in September, it was agreed that the restored building would be called "Portersville Academy," returning it to its original name. Nancy and Dick Harrington had taken charge of the grounds and they now looked "tidy and well-kept." By November the building had been cleaned out. The fire Marshall had concerns about a crack in the chimney and the stove on the first floor which needed to be addressed.

December brought a reluctant but necessary decision. "After discussing the restoration of the Academy building it was concluded that it would be more feasible to build an additional building on the grounds with toilet facilities. Sewerage was too costly for the old building." It was also apparent that the old wooden building "could not provide adequate fire protection for historic documents. . . Therefore, the project became threefold – to restore Portersville Academy to its original splendor, to build a fireproof building adjacent to the academy with archival and research facilities, and to tie the two buildings together with fencing, landscaping and parking facilities." (Case statement 1985) This was a much bigger undertaking. It would be 1987 before both buildings were finished and in operation.

Many and creative were the fundraising efforts in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A notice to the membership in June of 1976 advertised:

Every child in Mystic would enjoy the replica of the Portersville Academy which is being constructed for the July 4th float for his or her very own playhouse. The 5x7 building will be put up for auction immediately after the final parade ceremonies in the church parking lot on Church Street. All proceeds will go to the restoration of the real Portersville. Come and bid on a truly unique gift!

A long-running partnership with the Mystic Seaport Museum Stores began in 1976 also, called "Two Days to Remember." (10/76) It became a three day event in 1981. (9/81) The first one raised \$690.25, "of which \$375 was from percentage of sales and \$314.55 from sale of raffle tickets." (1/77) The formula for money from this event changed through the years. In 1998 the event raised \$1,305 just from the sale part. The raffle was not held because permits were not secured in time. (1/98 & 2/98) Revenue decreased markedly after 2000, and the last "Three Days to Remember" occurred in 2004. A Show House in 1977 was a major effort and raised \$7,000, \$1,000 more than expected. The newsletter exulted that it made "the opening of the Portersville Academy a certain event." (9/77)

Unfortunately, it did not. In June of 1978 the contractor was told that funds were exhausted and he couldn't repaint the Academy or replace the shutters. The costs were much higher than expected because of hidden rot, and also inflation. On the plus side, the building was weather tight, there was a new roof, and an appeal to the membership for window weights had been successful (including three dug up in a garden). Efforts would now focus on grounds keeping, getting donations of paint, repairing the oval window, etc. (6/78)

In October, the fund raising committee estimated that it would need \$20,000 more to finish the Portersville restoration, and another \$20,000 to build a curatorial building "as per our original objective. It is imperative that we raise this money as quickly as possible in order to keep up with inflation. Every year that goes by adds additional costs to our project." (10/78)

More fundraising efforts followed. In March of 1979 the state Committee for the Restoration of Historic Assets in Connecticut recommended that the Society should receive \$10,000 in funding for the restoration. As with many such grants, the terms were that the work must be done and paid for, then receipted bills submitted for payment. The Society's Board did not want to start work again until there was a guarantee that the money would actually be forthcoming. As of January, 1980, the Bond Commission had not approved the grant, and appeals were issued to the membership to contact anyone they could think of who might expedite the approval. (1/80) By March there had been "much progress" on getting the money, and the building committee was making firm plans for the work to resume. (3/80) Bureaucracy moved at its usual stately pace, however, and the grant was finally signed by the Attorney General in June. (6/80)

It was not until a year later that the president, Joyce Everett, could say in her June annual report that the cupola had been built and the building committee was working on choosing a contractor to complete the interior restoration. The work needing to be done included stairways, the entry wall, a new electrical system, plastering and painting. Architect Pat Liebig had provided the specifications. Mystic Seaport was thanked for its gift of the bell of the old Mystic Academy, which was now in place. In keeping with the long range plan for the site, the drawings for the curatorial building were finished, but specifications needed to be done for a complete package. (7/81)

The opening for the refurbished Portersville Academy was held July 7, 1982, (6/82) and groups began to use it shortly after that. It was not until January of 1985, however, that the newsletter reported that the restoration was "essentially complete."

Like most old buildings, Portersville did not stay in a pristine state after the work was done. There was a serious fire in 1996. A major fundraising campaign was held beginning in 2003 to repair water damage, strengthen joists, and otherwise make it even better than it was. The campaign, which concluded in 2006, included a reserve fund for future needs. (4/03 and 1/07). Over \$125,000 was spent on repairs at this time.

AND THEN WHAT?

Portersville Academy was not intended to be simply a monument. At first it was used for meetings of various groups, and open during special events like house and garden tours. During the mid-1990s, when the Mystic Community Center ran a “First Night” program with events throughout Mystic, it was a popular destination for families. (1/95, 2/96, 1/97, 11-12/98) For several years it was open on specified weekends during the summer tourist season, with volunteer docents available to explain its history. (9/90)

One of the longest-running Society programs is its school outreach. This was first recommended by the long range planning committee early in 1990, which stated, “We have an abundance of material to present an excellent program and space on the upper floor of Portersville Academy.” A 1849 school room was set up

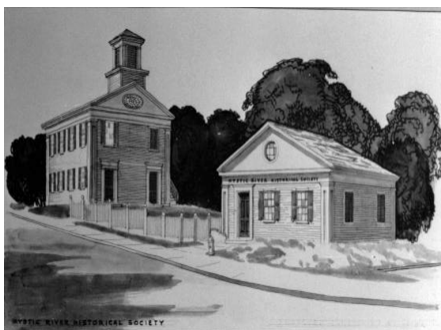
with desks built by George Keith, George Fearn and others. The design was copied from a desk thought to be original to the building. By early in 1991 schools had begun to express interest in the Society’s newly developed program, spearheaded by Arden



Leach, which included planned visits to Portersville Academy with follow-up curriculum packets. (2/91) The number of schools and students visiting Portersville for sessions with “Mr. Potter,” “Miss Williams,” or other “teachers” grew tremendously. In 2002 the September newsletter reported that there had been 506 school visitors to Portersville in May: 168 first graders, 296 third graders, 24 fifth graders, and 18 home schoolers. The program received the 1995 Connecticut League of Historical Organizations Merit Award. (9/95) Since then it has continued to expand its hand-on activities beyond just the upstairs schoolroom.

THE WILLIAM A. DOWNES ARCHIVES BUILDING

Once Portersville Academy was completed in 1985 it was time to start raising money for the construction of the planned archives building. This was to be a fireproof and climate controlled structure that would house donated artifacts currently stored in the Mystic and Noank Library and various members' homes. The building committee's 1978 prediction that inflation would affect the cost



certainly held true, as it was now estimated it would cost \$95,000 rather than 1978's \$20,000. (1/85) Fundraising, under the direction of Joyce Everett, began in January of 1985, and by February the midway point of \$52,000 for the campaign was reached. By September the fund had exceeded \$90,000, and the committee planned to start construction during the fall. The Bodenwein Foundation grant of \$4,000 had been a great help. The October newsletter reported, however, that the groundbreaking ceremony was one of the things postponed by Hurricane Gloria.

The following May, the building committee's annual report said they were ready to recommend a contractor to the Board for approval. The report added, "Most of the past year was spent in working out with the Town changes in our plans that would make the plans compatible with various regulations." Architect Pat Liebzig acted as liaison with the town, provided the site plan and specifications at no charge for his time, and worked out the best locations for water and sewer tie-in. Other matters the committee dealt with included enlarging the building to 30 feet wide by 28 feet long ("a modest change, but worthwhile"), and moving the parking area from the street to between the two buildings. The committee was able to persuade the town that there was no need for the regulation sidewalk, which would have had to be 200 feet long and cost \$8,000.

All of which shows that a building does not have to be a historic restoration to involve a great deal of work. The contractor selected, A. DuBreuil & Sons, Inc., could start immediately, so a groundbreaking ceremony was hastily arranged for June 15th, with plans for a ribbon-cutting in October.

Well before the groundbreaking, the Board had held a special meeting at the home of Board member Willa T. Schuster. It was voted unanimously to name the new building the “William A. Downes Archives Building.” As the Board’s letter informing him of this decision said:

The trustees agree completely that we would not have the building except for you, Bill Downes, nor would the restoration of Portersville Academy have progressed so successfully. You have been involved in every phase since the building was a gleam in our eyes, participating in planning, acting as liaison with the architect and bringing us up-to-date with your carefully detailed reports.

Although Bill Downes was “flattered to be associated with the building so closely,” he felt that Pat Liebig also deserved recognition for donating his services as architect. He requested that “Otto E. Liebig, architect,” be added to the sign. (Bd. 3/17/86)

The October newsletter reported that the walls with framed windows and the roof frame were up. Large pieces of rock had had to be removed when the foundation was put in place. By November the structure was enclosed and roofed, and the inside work could begin. Work continued inside throughout the winter.

Close to 150 people attended the opening of the building on June 21, 1987. Bill Downes was presented with the guest register from the event. (9/87)



By September volunteers had started inventorying the contents of the storage drawers in the building, under the supervision of Carol Kimball. The newsletter pointed out that the archives needed to be organized as well as listed, so that researchers could find materials easily. The workers hoped eventually to be “assisted by a computer.”

At first, the archives building was open Thursdays from 1:00-3:00 p.m. to work on organization. This was progressing well in May of 1988, with a computer in place and the inventory completed for all the drawers. Proper cataloging was the next task, and one which can be daunting to the inexperienced. Fortunately, members Bill Peterson and Rodi York were both part of the curatorial department at Mystic Seaport, and willing to assist Sandy Graham in designing “our very own MRHS computer program to fulfill our requirements for archival cataloging,” as the March 1990 newsletter reported. The long-range planning committee recommended that “a suitable person trained in archival work and library science” be hired for the summer to get the cataloging started and train volunteers to continue it. Roberta Donohue was the first of several to occupy the paid curator’s position through the years. (5/90) The computer program for accessions and cataloging was later changed to PastPerfect, a standard program for small historical societies.

Having a building specifically for housing archival materials of all sorts was a great incentive to donations. The collection grew rapidly, sometimes posing unexpected challenges. In November of 1990 the Society was looking for a German major student to translate the recently received old records of the German Social Society Frohsinn. In March of 1998 a special freezer for storage of nitrate negatives from the Akeley and Dickinson Collections was installed. By the time the Society’s 25th anniversary approached, the curator, Janet Godwin, could report that the building “now houses about 250 collections and thousands of items! Collections size varies, some have only a few items, while others have more than a thousand.” (11-12/97)

As the collection grew, there was a need for more staff and after the death of Janet Godwin in 2004, the Society applied for a grant from the Connecticut Humanities Council help fund the transition to the present level of three paid part-time staff. Currently,

the archives building is open Tuesday mornings and Wednesday and Thursday afternoons for research, continued cataloguing, and further efforts to make all the information there more available to anyone who needs it.

COLLECTIONS

What is a collection? People usually think of a personal collection as being about one subject—a stamp collection, for instance, or a model train collection. Collections in historical societies are not quite the same. One online definition of collection is, “A group of objects or works to be seen, studied, or kept together.” That means, for a historical society, that a collection may be of a related group of items, like the Society’s Blanche Sparks costume collection, given in 1973, “long before we had any buildings of our own.” (10/93) It may also refer to a wide variety of items relating to one person or organization, such as the Mary Jobe Akeley Collection, which has papers, photographs, items from Akeley’s explorations and trips to Africa, her Camp Mystic, and other aspects of her career.

The Akeley Collection is unusual in that it is not owned by the Mystic River Historical Society. As Dorrie Hanna explained in the September, 2007 newsletter:

So how did we get her stuff? The trail is long and convoluted, but a simplified explanation is that the material came to us for safekeeping, but remains the property of the Mary Jobe Akeley Trust. . . . The Trust pays us a yearly stipend for caring for this valuable collection and has empowered us to handle queries on their behalf.

Historical societies can also have collections that are kept together solely by virtue of all the items having been donated together by one person. Such is one of the largest collections of the Society, the Stinson Collection. It was donated via Bill Peterson after Jesse Stinson, president of the Groton Savings Bank, died in 1982. Jesse was a big fan of Mystic history and believed in saving everything that might possibly be useful to someone someday.

TO PROMOTE AND PRESERVE THE HISTORY OF MYSTIC

From the very beginning, the Mystic River Historical Society has felt its mission is “to promote and preserve the history of the Mystic, Connecticut area.” The Society has done this in many ways through the years. In 1979, the Board of trustees :

spent an entire meeting assessing the Society’s past accomplishments, its present role, and future goals as we saw them. We discovered that we had come a long way in six years. We reaffirmed that our aim was . . . to create an interest in our heritage, to preserve records of all sorts whenever we possibly could and provide a safe home for them for the use of the public, to provide historical information to those seeking it, and to support constructive community enterprises such as the recent 325th Birthday Celebration. Not earth-shaking goals but necessary and possible ones. (8/79)

The 1970s saw several celebrations of Mystic’s heritage, probably inspired by the 1976 U.S. Bicentennial. The Society participated in parades, coordinated the many activities of the 1975 “Heritage of Mystic” weekend, which included “events involving every segment of [the] community,” held their first house tour as part of the 1976 Fall Festival, (all JE’s summary. 1973-6) and for several years ran the “River Race Day.”

The river day was eventually taken over by the Mystic Community Center, (4/83) but the Society continued to hold house tours every three to four years. Each one focuses on a different part of Mystic, and is also a major fundraiser. In 2009 the tour was a house and garden tour done in conjunction with the Mystic Garden Club. (1/09)

Regular programs, usually monthly from September (now October) through May, have been held from 1973 on. These are aimed at adults, and through the years there has been a very wide variety of topics, many focusing on southeastern Connecticut. The September 1993 newsletter gave a “Past Program Chairman’s Report” by Alan Brush, with a listing of the programs from the past two years. The topics included: preserving archaeological sites in

southeastern Connecticut; 18th century hearth cooking; New London 1641-present; geology and landscape of Connecticut; a 1751 incident involving the Quoketaug Rangers; maintaining your historic house; a history of the *Nautilus*; songs sung by whale men; genealogy of the industrialization of Hartford; the John Mason controversy, given by the Pequot tribe's archaeologist; and a "Connecticut Sampler" of songs.

These meetings have always been free and open to the public. Although the day and time have changed, from the fourth Friday of the month at 8:00 p.m. to the fourth Wednesday at 7:30, they are still generally held in the Parish Hall of Mystic Congregational Church. Besides the program presented, they are a good way to remind members and potential members about upcoming events, and to share conversation as well as refreshments after the program.

The Mystic Junior Women's Club continued with their "project of researching and plaquing Mystic's historic houses. This began in 1969 with houses on West Mystic Avenue and Gravel Street and has continued on the west side of Mystic, marking houses built before 1900." They made complete copies of their records available to the Society in 1979. (12/79) This coordinated well with a project, launched by Bill Downes as chair of the Society's historical committee, to take photos of all the houses in the historic district. The committee had been taking photos of Mystic streets for a few years, and planned to eventually take photos of all the houses in Mystic. (10/88) These were updated by Bill Everett in 2004. (4/08) Beginning in 1983, the MRHS volunteered to help with the research for the plaques, and all information was on file at the Mystic and Noank Library. (post-6/83, n.d.) It is now also available at the Downes Archives Building.

In the May 1985 newsletter the historical committee report noted that the plaque information was sometimes very useful. The house at 6 Pearl Street had been sold to Sandor Balint, first violinist with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. His wife Joyce was also a violinist. The house was built in 1880. Research "showed that on 1912 the owner of their house was one *Welcome Fidler*, surely a good omen." Welcome was not himself a fiddler, apparently. He had a quick lunch and pool parlor on first floor and lived upstairs.

Most recently, as a project for our 40th Anniversary, downtown buildings have been selected for plaques which will include a QR code to allow information about the building's history to be accessed by cell phones. Research for the project is being done in part by students in local schools participating in the GeoHistorian project. Over 60 students are using the information they discover to make mini-documentaries about the historic buildings, which will appear on a smart phone when the QR code is scanned. (11-12/12)

Other programs have come and gone through the years. Tim Evers kept in shape by doing pedicab tours of downtown Mystic for three years beginning in 2005. The Board decided to discontinue the program in 2008 "because of the decline in tourist participation." (2/08) Antiques appraisal days were held for a number of years, until discontinued in 2011. (10/11)

A three-session (1930s, '40s, '50s) "Remember When" program for retirement communities, high schools, and other groups was developed in 2008 by Helen Keith and Jane Preston. (4/08) These featured audience participation and were quite popular.

Joyce Everett, a travel agent in the workaday world, offered day and overnight bus tours under the auspices of the MRHS which were very well received and well attended. Trips ranged from New York City to Virginia to Vermont. More recently, Sally Halsey led spring and fall one-day trips. (5/12 Board)

PUBLICATIONS

Most historical organizations have a newsletter which comes out more or less regularly. The Mystic River Historical Society's newsletter started early on, sometime in 1975. It was two or three pages of photocopied notices of upcoming events and activities. From this it has grown to eight to ten pages called, since September of 1997, "The Portersville Press," published six times a year, now electronically as well as on paper. It includes information on upcoming programs; reports of committees and Board meetings; news of new acquisitions, outreach programs, and publishing projects; and historical information, generally from the archives.

It has also used as a forum for answering queries that the curator has not been able to answer from what is available at the Downes Archives Building. The February 1980 newsletter had a follow up from earlier requests for information about record winters of the past. Rudy Favretti remembered that in 1934 cars were driven on the ice in the Mystic River. A further request was added for photos of such events. Several newsletters in 1989 recorded historian Carol Kimball's search for information on movies shot in Mystic before 1988's *Mystic Pizza*. People remembered movies being filmed in the early 1920s, but her twenty letters of inquiry to film repositories for a print of *Homeward Bound* had yielded only seven replies, all negative. (A 2013 Internet search, while much quicker in giving results, did not turn up any prints, either.)

Collection of other historical information is another function of the newsletter. In May of 2001 editor Stephanie Thorp requested that people submit their own stories, because "history is what's happening now" as well as long ago. Members also send in their memories of Mystic in various decades of the 20th century.

Material from the archives, such as sea captains' or soldiers' letters, reminiscences of "characters" who lived in Mystic, accounts of special occasions like the dedication of the Civil War monument, and many other fascinating bits of local history have been printed in the newsletter. These give the flavor of life in the area in days gone by.

In November of 1991 there was a note in the newsletter that the Society had received permission to use material from Helen Clarke Grimes' childhood diaries in the newsletters. These excerpts, describing life in Mystic from 1915, when Helen was ten, up to her marriage to Dorrance Grimes in 1926, were extremely popular with members. The historian's report noted in the February 1995 newsletter that the suggestion had been made that the diaries should be published in book form. She added, "It's something to consider for the future."

The future was not that far away, as the Board discussed the subject at their February meeting, agreeing that it should be done if Dorrance Grimes, Helen's widower, were willing. The diaries would

need to be transcribed first, “hopefully on a computer.” By March of 1996 the transcription was complete.

In May of 1997 historian Carol Kimball noted, “The Board has voted that the long-awaited publication of Helen’s diaries become our 25th Anniversary project and I think that is a wonderful plan. What better way to mark our growth than by making a significant historical document available for research in the future!”

A 25th Anniversary Fund Drive began in October, with a goal of \$25,000. The first project was to be the publication of the diaries. The publication committee of Judy Hicks, Carol Kimball, Dorrie Hanna, and Marilyn Comrie planned to complete the work by December of the same year. The first round of money was needed to publish, as after “approaching various publishers, it soon became obvious that we should publish the book ourselves.” The fund would then be maintained for future projects. (10/97)

The book, *An Account of My Life: The Childhood Journals of Helen May Clarke of Mystic, Connecticut, 1915-1926*, was ready by the December membership meeting, and the first copy was given to Dorrance Grimes. (1/98) In the coming year the book won three prestigious awards: the Connecticut League of History Organizations Award of Merit, the Connecticut Society of Genealogists Special Mention Award, and the Betty M. Linsley Award from the Association for the Study of Connecticut History for the best work on Connecticut history published by a local historical society.

Besides the external awards, the publication posthumously fulfilled a long time dream of Helen’s. An April 1999 newsletter remembrance of Dorrance Grimes said that he was very pleased because the book’s publication meant “her dearest wish was granted, and through him, her journals have made a lasting contribution to the literature of Connecticut history.”

The Society has been involved in several other publishing projects through the years. Its very first project, even before the newsletter was started, was *The Story of One Corner of Connecticut in Sixteen Maps*. Bill Downes was the chair of the historical committee, and the “leading spirit” of the map project. As Carol Kimball said in her October 1988 remembrance of Downes:

These historic maps covering the period from 1614 through 1868 were printed on fine quality paper with paragraphs of commentary and were very popular when they appeared. Typical of Bill he advised us to have a large number printed to put some away for future use. He was right, for these map folders sold very well during the house tour in May 1988. Also in typical Bill Downes fashion he devised a way to use the scraps of paper left when the maps were cut to size, creating attractive folded notepaper which also sold well.

As can be seen from the above, this was a do-it-yourself project. Joyce Everett noted in her June 1975 president's report that while the maps and notepaper were on sale in several locations, "The portfolios and notepaper are still being assembled at work sessions in the Fullers' basement . . ."

Publications since then have not required that sort of assembly, but they have certainly meant a lot of work for those involved. The president's message in the March 1995 newsletter announced a

book of self guided walking tours on the west side of the Mystic River. Helen Keith has written four tours: Through the Heart of Downtown, Along the Riverside, The High Road, and Captains' Walk. . . . This booklet will not only cover its costs, but hopefully net a profit in the future. But more importantly, the tours will tell a story about Mystic and its past. And that is what we are all about!

By May the booklet, called *Curbstones, Clapboards and Cupolas*, was out. It was twenty pages and cost \$3.00. It is still available as a PDF on the Society's web site.

The web site itself was another sort of publication. The April 2003 newsletter reported that it went online on March 27:

Member Stephanie Thorp designed and built the site over the winter, using Microsoft Front Page and a lot of patience.

A relatively short ten years later, it can be difficult to remember that web sites were then quite new for many historical organizations. The groundwork for the site had been laid by a 1998 Allyn Foundation grant of \$4,000 for a new computer and software. Besides the web site, the Society now sends reminders and notices via G-mail, as well as distributing the newsletter electronically, and has had a Facebook page since 2009.

Having a web site has extended the Society's presence in ways unimaginable a generation ago. Research requests can, and do, come from as far away as England and New Zealand, (NZ 10/03) and can be answered as quickly as a request from Mystic. Collections Manager, Dorrie Hanna, and staff members Betsy Boucher and Louisa Watrous, continue to catalog, index, and otherwise do what they can to make the information in the archives as easily accessible as possible.

Mystic's 350th anniversary celebration in 2004 was the occasion for a major Society publication. The Board of directors' report in the April 2003 newsletter noted that it had authorized president Dorrie Hanna to "enter into a contract on its behalf with Arcadia Publishing for the production of a book about Mystic in their Images of America series. The book should be ready by May 1, 2004, thus available as part of the Mystic 350th events."

The book, *Images of America: Mystic*, was out in March of 2004, and the April newsletter pointed out that while the official author was the Mystic River Historical Society, the work had been done by Judy Hicks and Dorrie Hanna. The May newsletter told of a book signing at Bank Square Books, which had already sold over 20% of the first printing of 2,200 copies.

A new sort of "publication" came with the release in January of 2005 of DVDs of Bailey Pryor's movie, *Mystic: An American Journey*. The Society assisted with research and information and benefits from sales of the film. Bailey donated the master copy and the rights to the MRHS.

A Kayaker's Guide to the Mystic River and Its History, by Lou Allyn, was issued in May of 2007. As the May newsletter said, "The brochure is an 11"x14" two-sided, waterproof, tri-fold piece with maps of the Upper and Lower Mystic River identifying both historical sites and locations of public access to the water. Explanatory text

gives the reader some information about each of the identified sites.” It was immediately popular; by September the printing costs had been fully recovered.

A Mystic Riverside Walking Adventure, a free walking tour brochure of Gravel Street developed by David Evans & Jennifer Pryor, came out in 2008. It was planned “to distribute these guides to the Mystic Depot, key businesses in town, the Downes building, the Mystic & Noank Library, and to members at the Annual Meeting.” (9/08) It is currently posted on the Society’s web site as well as being available around town..

The Society’s most recent publishing venture was the 2010 publication of a commissioned book of “watercolor portraits of Mystic landmarks.” The artist, Ashley Halsey, is from Stonington. Launched in October of 2010, *Colors of Mystic* has 19 original watercolors of such well-known Mystic features as the drawbridge, the Mystic Congregational Church, and, of course, Portersville Academy. (9/10) The text was written by a committee of David Evans, Tim Evers, Sally Halsey and Dorrie Hanna.. Publication costs were covered by the 25th Anniversary Fund, as usual to be reimbursed with proceeds from sales.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

The Mystic River Historical Society has been an active, vibrant part of the community of Mystic throughout its existence. As early as June of 1988, the newsletter report of the house tour participation “reflects the growing reputation of the Historical Society as an important regional resource center.” Organizations such as the Mystic Art Center, Mystic Garden Club, Mystic Seaport, the Rotary Club, Mystic and Noank Library, the Mystic Junior Women’s Club, to name a few, have cooperated with and supported the Society.

Local restaurateur (and member) Jon Kodama sponsored anniversary parties at his Steak Loft restaurant, parties which were part celebration and part fundraisers for work yet to be done.

In 2004, Dorrie Hanna as president of the Society accepted the Community Service Award of the Mystic Chamber of Commerce.

It particularly cited the “wonderful year of activities in celebration of Mystic’s 350th”.

It is always difficult, and sometimes impossible, to predict where an organization will be in, say, another forty years. Who would have predicted in 1973 that a history of the historical society would be done on a computer owned by one person, in her *home*? Or that the Society itself would own more than one computer, and moreover need them for record-keeping and research? Or that people would be able to hold a telephone (carried in a pocket or purse, yet) up to a square of squiggles on the side of a building and then use the same phone to watch a short video relayed by those squiggles that teaches about the building’s history?

At the same time, much remains the same. People are still interested in history, and feel a special connection to local history. Membership in the Society has increased from the “charter” group of about 250 household units to around 300 such units.

Adults, whether members or not, ask questions about their family’s or the town’s history. Schoolchildren are fascinated by the times before they were born, whether those times were their parents’ childhoods or many years before that. Older students, with a better grasp of the concept of the past, research and write (whether essays or scripts for performance) so that others may learn also.

Over the years the Society has adapted to changes in the interests and composition of its membership and continues to use developments in the internet and social media to share its knowledge and collections with everyone in the world interested in the history of Mystic. By continuing to adapt, while keeping its mission in mind, it will still be a thriving organization not only on its 50th, but its 100th anniversary.

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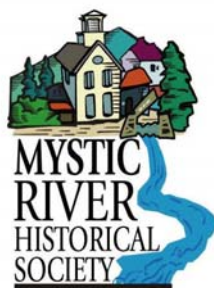
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