

Taking a Hard Look at History

“*A Vanished Port: Middletown & the Caribbean, 1750-1824*,” opens to the public on September 10 here at the Middlesex County Historical Society and is a portrait of early Middletown, which was an important New England port during the heyday of the West Indies trade. The exhibit depicts the luxurious life of merchants as evidenced by the Society’s collections, but also shows that Middletown’s prosperity rested on the suffering of enslaved workers in the sugar monoculture of the English Caribbean.

The Historical Society’s collections of furniture and decorative arts illuminate the rich material culture of 18th century Middletown during the era when it was a major port provisioning agricultural products, livestock, and other goods to the slave-worked sugar islands of the English Caribbean. This highly lucrative commerce is documented in the Society’s extensive collection of shipping records and other primary sources.

“We thought this would be a more modern way to illuminate our extraordinary collections, and to put them in more human perspective,” said society Executive Director Deborah Shapiro. “Our board of directors agreed, and with the support of Connecticut Humanities, our project team began during the late winter of 2015 to research the stories and objects around which we would build a narrative.”

Deeply invested in the Caribbean slave economy, Middletown sea captains were also involved in the West African slave trade itself but, as background research for the exhibition supports, Middletown’s rise to mercantile glory rested on slavery in the Caribbean, much more than on the direct trading with Africa in human beings.

“One of the problems that inhibits our understanding of the scope of slavery is that, particularly in New England, we tend to define slavery narrowly, as in ‘How many captives lived here?’ or ‘Who owned them?’ But those questions are just a small part of the story,” said Anne Farrow, principal writer and guest curator for the exhibit.

“We want to make clear that Middletown’s maritime success underwrote many forms of prosperity in the town, and that this early wealth rested squarely on human oppression in the Caribbean. This is a new way to understand the dynamic interaction of slavery and



capitalism, and a way to put the port’s enterprising mariners and profound black suffering on the same page,” she said.

Brenda Milkofsky, former director of the Connecticut River Museum and an authority on New England’s maritime history, chose objects from the Society’s collections for exhibit display, determined their positioning within the exhibit, helped bring in relevant objects from other museums, and wrote interpretive panels.

“The Historical Society is such a treasure trove of great objects and Anne Farrow’s research is so dense that the challenge with ‘A Vanished Port’ has been to somehow fit it all in,” she said. “This show has many compelling stories and lots of contrasting textures that make it appeal to a whole variety of audiences, so I can see it attracting visitors over a long period of time.”

The Connecticut State Library, a partner in the exhibit, has created a digital version of the 18th century logbooks of three slaveships, two of them based in Connecticut, for the exhibition. A Connecticut man named Dudley Saltonstall, the descendent of governors and colonial America’s earliest settlers, served as chief mate on the three voyages documented in these logbooks. The digital version of the logbooks will be introduced as part of the exhibit opening, and will be displayed in a special kiosk at the exhibit and available online. A Middletown sea captain, John Easton, served as commander on the first African voyage contained in the logbooks.

After the exhibition opens, a speakers’ series will continue for the following year, addressing topics related to the show, including the trade in horses between Connecticut and the Caribbean, the lives of Connecticut’s enslaved, how rum was made in the 18th century, and understanding 18th century money in 21st century terms.

(continued on page 3)

President's Message

Dear Friends,

As you may have heard, the State's financial health is relatively poor. This last budget cycle, cuts were made to various state agencies that house historic sites and museums, such as the Old State House. In addition, the CT Humanities' state allocation was cut by millions of dollars.

Despite the negative news at the State level, the Middlesex County Historical Society continues to make positive steps forward in terms of the visitor experience and the preservation of our collection and building. In the following month, the museum will be debuting its newest exhibit, "A Vanished Port: Middletown & the Caribbean 1750-1824," which we believe will bring in visitors from across the state and beyond. As we prepare for the opening of the exhibit, the staff and board have been making long-needed improvements to the museum spaces. The research/board room has received a coat of paint and now showcases paintings from our collection, and the exhibit rooms have been painted and new LED

lights installed to help reduce costs as well as to improve lighting for the new exhibit. The once stark white bathroom with leaky faucets has seen a total renovation with new fixtures and wainscoting. On the exterior of the house, patients from the Connecticut Valley Hospital planted a new annual garden to welcome visitors as they enter the back yard of the Mansfield House.

This work could not have been done without the help of volunteers and the generous financial support of members like you! However, in order to continue this progress, we as a board need your assistance. Please contact us if you are interested in volunteering or helping to contribute in other ways. Help us make the Middlesex County Historical Society the shining example of what we all can do together to preserve our history and heritage, even in these difficult times. Contact Debby Shapiro at mchs@wesleyan.edu or 860-346-0746 if you wish to contribute in any way. In the meantime, I hope to see you at our next event and at the opening of our new exhibit!



Joseph Samolis
President

Director's Message

Dear Members,

The opening of "A Vanished Port" is the culmination of several years of planning, researching, writing, assessing our own collection, looking for objects and images in other museum collections, and even painting the interior of the Mansfield House. I have been privileged to have worked with Anne Farrow, our principal researcher and writer and author of *The Logbooks: Connecticut Slave Ships and Human Memory*, and Brenda Milkofsky, our exhibit manager and former director of the Connecticut River Museum and an expert on Connecticut River shipping, in mounting this landmark exhibition. Lee McQuillan and Erik Hesselberg have created a beautiful video that evokes visions of sea captains and their ships leaving Middletown's wharves. Special thanks go to Pat Tully, who put together all the electronic aspects of the exhibit.

Our advisory board consisting of scholars in the field and community members offered advice and counsel in our deliberations. They are Joseph Avitable, Lois Brown, August DeFrance, Christopher Dobbs, Demetrius Eudell, Tamara Lanier, Mardi Loman, William Pinch, Robert Reutenauer, Ronald Schatz, Gary Shaw, Victor Triay, Pat Tully, Gina Ulysse, Kendall Wiggin, and Krishna Winston. In the article about the exhibit on Page 1 in the newsletter, you will read about the many artisans and volunteers who helped make the exhibit possible.

A speakers' series will be ongoing and I am available to speak to your civic group or host tours of the exhibit for your group. Storyboards with highlights of the exhibit will be available later in the fall for display at the city hall, Russell Library and other venues.

Although I have been primarily focused on the exhibition, other events recently brought attention to the Society. Attendance at the annual meeting with Pat Tully's talk about Middletown 150 years ago and Bill Corvo's talk about his father Max and his role in the OSS in WWII drew large crowds. This year's Sheedy Contest drew 180 entries with 18 chosen as winners. The students, families, and teachers enjoyed the reception in the Mansfield House backyard on a beautiful June day with the rose garden in bloom. There was also a strong showing at the Middletown Garden Club and Art Guild Show in May.

I look forward to working with our new president and vice president, Joe Samolis and Brandie Doyle. In addition to bringing youthful energy to the board, they are busy reorganizing the committees and thinking of new ways to make the Society a cultural force in the community.

I do hope to see many of you at our "Vanished Port" opening reception on September 8 and in the weeks that follow.

Best,



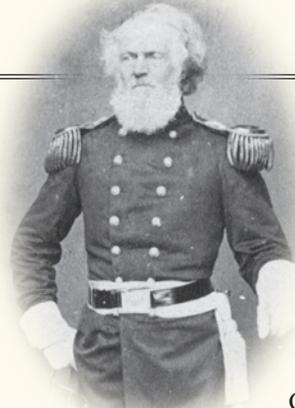
Debby Shapiro

SOCIETY NEWS



Society's Newest Exhibit to Debut at Reception on September 8

“*A Vanished Port: Middletown & the Caribbean, 1750–1824*” will open to grand fanfare at a reception for members of the Society and invited guests on Thursday, September 8 from 5:30 to 7:30 pm at the General Mansfield House. Guests will be treated to a rum drink from the islands as well as hors d'oeuvres, wine, and other beverages. There will be brief remarks by the members of the team who have been working for several years to bring this exhibition to fruition. Members will also have a chance to meet members of the advisory board in attendance who shared their expertise to help make this exhibit a reality. To reserve your place, please call 860-346-0746. 🍷



Society Welcomes New Members

The Society is pleased to welcome the following new members: Daniel & Elizabeth Clifford, Bob Crawshaw, Benjamin Daley, Charles & Jane Fitzgerald, Gerard & Joyce Furlong, David Holbrook, Middlesex Community College c/o Cheryl Dumont-Smith, Sheldyn Oliver, Roger Palmer, Kathie Puglisi, and Anastasia Spencer. Our newest life members are Bob & Lisa Santangelo. Those who joined in person had some very interesting Middletown stories to tell, so I hope that you will have the chance to talk to them at upcoming events. Membership renewals went out in April and we have received generous responses from many of you for which we are most grateful. Exciting times are ahead with the opening of the new exhibit and many interesting programs complementing it. Please renew, if you have not done so, so you will not miss out on the chance to learn more of Middletown's fascinating history and enjoy “The Historical Observer,” and free admission to the museum and programs. 🍷

A Hard Look at History continued

Also invaluable in the building of the exhibition were Pat Tully, David Wolfram, John Giammatteo, Richard Bergan, Bill & Jennifer Argyle, Joseph Samolis, Scott Bishel, Adam Fleming, Susan Ryczek, Peter Gedrys, Bob Van Dyke, Phil Martin, Nicole DiBenedetto, and our student interns, Jonathan Crook, Maggie Masselli, Charlotte Scott, Craig Nakatsuka, Sadie Renjilian, Bebe LeGardeur, and Olivia Sayah. Erik Hesselberg and Lee McQuillan created a video that includes original musical scoring by McQuillan and narration by Bruce MacLeod that will be used as a marketing and promotional tool. Gerry Daley and Brian Richmond lent their golden tones to the audio aspects of the project.

“We hold many beautiful, important 18th and early 19th century objects and documents in our collections,” Shapiro explained. “‘A Vanished Port’ allows us to explore their often-fearsome human cost.”

Funding for “A Vanished Port” has come from Connecticut Humanities, the Maximilian E. & Marion O. Hoffman Foundation, the Return Jonathan Meigs Fund at Wesleyan University, Richard & Alexandra Adelstein, Jane Bradbury, and Deborah Shapiro. 🍷



Middlesex County Historical Society Membership Application

_____ Name

_____ Address

_____ City

_____ State

_____ Zip

_____ Telephone

_____ E-mail

Membership Levels

____ Student \$20 ____ Business \$60
 ____ Individual \$30 ____ Patron \$125
 ____ Family \$40 ____ Life \$500

Please make checks payable to The Middlesex County Historical Society. Detach and send to General Mansfield House, 151 Main Street, Middletown, CT 06457

Company G to Stage Preservation March



On Saturday, October 1, at 1:00 pm the streets of Middletown will come alive with members of Company G of the 14th Regiment Connecticut Volunteer Infantry marching in full uniform beginning at the General Joseph Mansfield House and ending with a firing salute at the grave of General Mansfield in Indian Hill Cemetery. Members of the Society and the general public are invited to march along and hear brief talks about the city's rich Civil War history.

The first stop, after opening remarks at the Mansfield House, will be the South Green where the Civil War Soldiers' Monument and the Henry Clay Work Monument will be highlighted along with the 14th CVI stop in Middletown on the way to the battlefield. Wesleyan's Memorial Chapel, built to honor students who served in the war, will be visited enroute to the 24th CVI monument on the Washington Green. The stories of local

soldiers buried in Mortimer Cemetery will be told before returning to the Mansfield House and a talk by Buck Zaidel, the author of *Heroes for All Time: Connecticut Civil War Soldiers Tell Their Stories*.

After driving to Indian Hill Cemetery, the final stops will be the Washington Terrace Cemetery, the final resting place of Middletown's African American soldiers, the GAR Monument in Indian Hill, and General Mansfield's grave. The walking distance of Part I is about 2 miles, with the second part being about ½ mile. The Company G members and the Society are seeking pledges of \$10 with the proceeds being divided between the maintenance of the Mansfield House and Civil War battlefield preservation efforts. 🌱

In the event of heavy rain, the march will be cancelled.

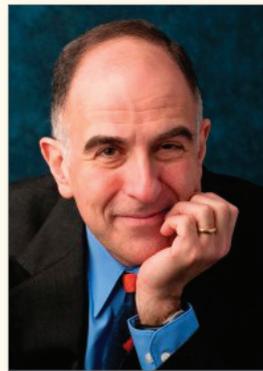
How Rich Was Rich: Vanished Port Speakers' Series Explores 18th Century Currency

When Middletown merchant Richard Alsop died in 1776, his estate — which included property, possessions, enslaved human beings, and a large amount of money owed to him — was valued at 52,000 pounds. But what does this mean? Were Alsop and his fellow Middletown businessmen rich by modern standards?

Wesleyan professor and monetary scholar Richard Grossman understands the complexity of comprehending that long-ago economy in the present day, and will address its ticklish and fascinating questions in a presentation at 7 pm on November 9 in the Hubbard Room at Russell Library as "A Vanished Port" continues its special speakers' series.

"A Vanished Port: Middletown and the Caribbean, 1750-1824" is a newly opened exhibit at the Middlesex County Historical Society, and through objects and documents illuminates the culture of prosperity that grew from Middletown's trade relationships with the slave-worked sugar plantations of the English Caribbean.

Dr. Grossman is a professor of Economics at Wesleyan and a visiting scholar at the Institute for Quantitative



Social Science at Harvard University. In his illustrated presentation, he will discuss the colonial currency of early Connecticut, its buying power, the monetary standards of the time, and the difficulty of understanding a very different form of money in today's economy.

Author of *Unsettled Account: The Evolution of Banking in the Industrialized World since*

1800 (Princeton University Press, 2010) and *WRONG: Nine Economic Policy Disasters and What We Can Learn from Them* (Oxford University Press, 2013), Dr. Grossman teaches classes in American and European Economic History, Macroeconomics, and Money and Banking. During the research for "A Vanished Port," he provided helpful guidance to the exhibit team in their effort to make sense of the values shown in 18th and early 19th century probate records for Middletown's merchant mariners.

And what was Richard Alsop worth when he died? Dr. Grossman will discuss the different ways to answer that complicated question, but by any yardstick one uses, Alsop was a multi-millionaire! 🌱

“Vanished Port” Exhibit Introduces Speakers’ Series

As part of the community programming for the Society’s new exhibition “A Vanished Port: Middletown & the Caribbean, 1750-1824,” a special speakers’ series will be introduced in October.

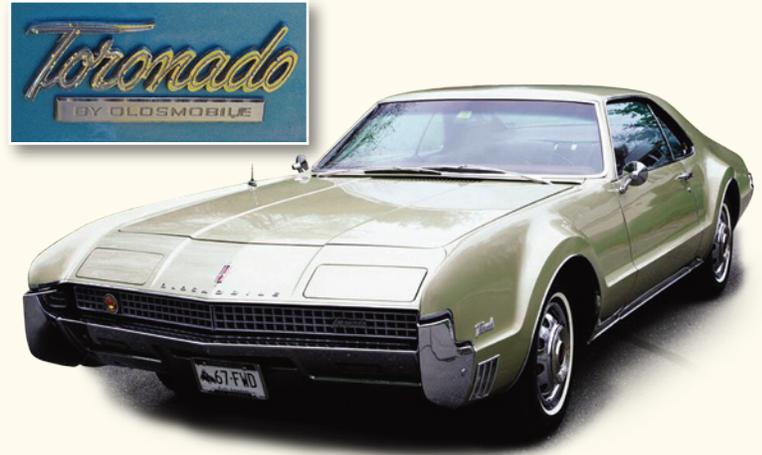
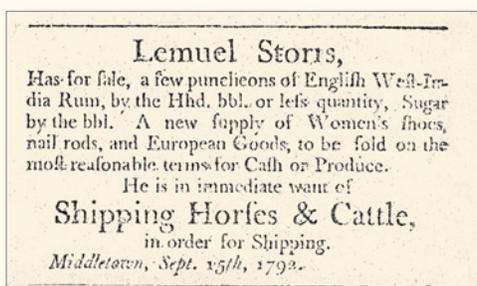
Kicking off the series on topics related to Middletown and the West Indies, Joseph R. Avitable, Ph.D., will discuss the profitable and lethal trade in horses between Connecticut and the English Caribbean islands where enslaved men and women grew sugar.

A lecturer in American history at Albertus Magnus College, at Quinnipiac University, and currently writing a book on New England and the English Caribbean, Dr. Avitable will examine the relationship between Connecticut and the West Indies during the period before the American Revolution. His talk will be held on Wednesday, October 19, at 7 p.m. in the Hubbard Room at Russell Library.

Avitable will discuss how trade with the Caribbean helped foster the economic development of Connecticut and made the colony a powerhouse of the Atlantic World. A special focus of his research has been the trade in horses — tens of thousands of which were raised in Connecticut and exported to the Caribbean to plow the cane fields, turn the wheels of the fiery sugar mills, and haul sugar products to the coasts for shipping. Avitable has found that approximately 75 percent of the thousands of horses exported from New England to the Caribbean were raised in Connecticut. The trade in horses may have played the single biggest part in the colony’s success in the Caribbean.

His research has also uncovered that even as the sugar plantations were lethal for the enslaved human workers, horses also were worked to death in the fierce cycle of the sugar harvest.

A native of Connecticut, Dr. Avitable holds a bachelor’s degree from Central Connecticut State University, where he majored in economics and history. He received a master’s degree in Economics and History from Trinity College in 2001. At Trinity, he began to focus his research on Atlantic economic history, eventually writing his master’s thesis on the relationship between capitalism and slavery. He holds a doctorate from the University of Rochester, and wrote his dissertation on Connecticut’s integration in the Atlantic World between 1635 and 1776. 🍀



31st Annual Car Show Features 1967 Oldsmobile Toronado Deluxe

Every year the car show committee searches far and wide for a worthy car to be featured. This year’s showpiece is a 1967 Oldsmobile Toronado Deluxe owned by Doug Feest from Southington. It was ordered new in Canandaigua, New York, by the original owner who maintained it in excellent condition for 35 years until he was too old to drive. It will motor to Middletown using its 425 “Toronado Rocket” engine producing 385 H.P. and 475 lbs of torque.

This car sports seldom-seen options including Strato-bucket seats, rumored to be in as few as 508 of the more than 21,000 cars produced for 1967. Another rare option is the Climatic Combustion Control air cleaner, replacing the usual round unit with twin snorkels. A 1967-1968-only option, it provided for a quicker warm-up, allowing for a faster opening of the choke and better fuel mileage when starting out.

Other options include power windows and vacuum power door locks, vacuum power trunk, cruise control, AM-FM radio with the first year stereo separator under the dash, Comfortron four-season climate control, and a tilt and telescope steering wheel.

The show will be held at Palmer Field adjacent to Washington Street, Route 66, in Middletown on Sunday, October 2. Car registration begins at 8:30 am and judging starts at 11:30 am. Trophies made by the committee, consisting of chairman Rich Bergan, Jerry Augustine, Pete Bozzo, Mark Olerud, Jack Pieper, Seb Sbalcio, and Debby Shapiro will be awarded to the top 30 vehicles at 2:30 pm. General admission is \$3 and children 12 and under are free. Car registration is \$10. Although cars registered for judging must be dated 1991 or older, there is no cut-off date for cars being placed in the car corral.

In the event of rain, the show will be held Sunday, October 9. Flea market spaces are \$15 and the market opens at 7 am. For more information, call the Society at 860-346-0746. 🍀



CALENDAR OF EVENTS

The Museum at the Mansfield House	OPEN Monday – Thursday and Saturday 10:00 to 2:00
Open Air Market at Wadsworth Mansion Historical Society Booth	Sunday, August 28, 10:00 to 4:00
A Vanished Port Gala Reception	Thursday, September 8, 5:30-7:30 pm
Company G Preservation March Mansfield House	Saturday, October 1, 1:00 pm
31st Annual Car Show Palmer Field, Washington Street	Sunday, October 2, 8:30 am – 3:00 pm
Speakers' Series Launch –Joseph Avitable Hubbard Room, Russell Library	Wednesday, October 19, 7:00 pm
How Rich Was Rich – Richard Grossman Hubbard Room, Russell Library	Wednesday, November 9, 7:00 pm