

Ships for the Trade & the Rise of the Middletown Customs Port

The hammering and sawing sounds of shipbuilding echoed through the air in the lower Connecticut River Valley in the 18th and 19th centuries. Brenda Milkofsky will explore the shipbuilding trade in a presentation entitled “Ships for the Trade & the Rise of the Middletown Customs Port” at 7 p.m. on January 24 in the Hubbard Room at Russell Library as the Middlesex County Historical Society continues its special speakers’ series.

As examined in the “Vanished Port” exhibit currently on display, Middletown was uniquely situated to play a major role in the West Indies Trade. The fertile Central Valley to the north yielded the produce desired by the sugar-producing islands of the Caribbean and the Connecticut River to the south provided a navigable pathway to the sea. Thus, the Valley was a perfect landscape for the development of the shipbuilding industry evolving into a lucrative trade that lasted for some 200 years. During this period, plentiful wood and falling water attracted skilled artisans who built thousands of vessels, most of them for the Caribbean trade. It is this astonishing record that made for the establishment of a Federal Customs House, uncommonly located 32 nautical miles from salt water.

Brenda Milkofsky was the founding director of the Connecticut River Museum at Steamboat Dock in Essex and retired as their Senior Curator. A graduate of Central Connecticut State College, she also served for nine years as Director of the Wethersfield Historical Society. She has written and lectured on a variety of topics about Connecticut Valley history and currently works as a museum consultant in exhibition development. Most recently, Brenda designed & managed the “Vanished Port” exhibit. 🌿

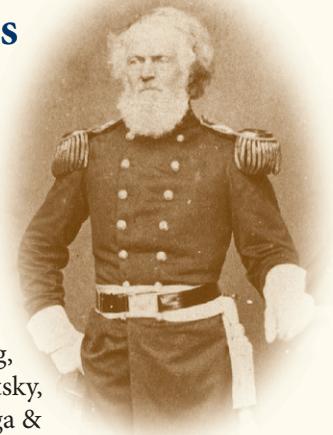


Brenda Milkofsky re-rigging Van Deursen ship's model



Society Welcomes New Members

The Society is pleased to welcome the following new members: Collin Berill, Carol Bonaiuto, Gerry & Diane Daley, Kathryn E. Duncan, Alison Fredericks, Rhea Higgins, Marshall Hanig, William Konefal, Drew Krinitzky, Carolyn Laban, Steve Machuga & Sari Rosenblatt, Robert McNaughton, Dayna Palmer, Robert Pawlowski, Barbara Puorro & Jerry Edelwich, Matthew Shelley-Read, Anthony Vinci, and Louisa Winchell. Some were attracted by our new exhibit while others were attracted by our archives. But they all share an interest in Middletown's history and support our mission of keeping it alive for present and future generations. 🌿



President's Message

The Board of Directors would like to wish you a Happy New Year!

*T*his year we will continue to promote our mission of the study of historical and genealogical subjects relative to Middlesex County, Connecticut. To do this, we will continue to have a variety of programming open to the membership and to potential new members and the general public.

The Society works with other organizations to promote the history of our City through the use of new interactive tools. For example, recently the City of Middletown, in tandem with Wesleyan University and the Historical Society, reviewed the City's 1920s aerial photography. Wesleyan students worked in the Society's archives researching and analyzing images and historical information to illustrate the impact that riverfront redevelopment has had on citizens in the downtown area of Middletown.

In addition, you may have noticed that our website has changed. We are trying to make accessing the Historical Society easier and more user-friendly. This could not have been done without the help of former Board of Directors member Pat Tully, who is now in Ketchikan, Alaska working as their library Director. We on the Board wish her well at her new position. She will be missed at the Society!

At anytime, if you are interested in visiting, volunteering, and/or donating to the Society you can contact our Director, Debby Shapiro, at mchs@wesleyan.edu or 860-346-0746. In the meantime, I hope to see you at our next event and invite you to explore our current exhibit, "A Vanished Port: Middletown & the Caribbean, 1750-1824."

Sincerely,



Joseph Samolis
President

Director's Message

Dear Members,

*M*uch has happened here at the Mansfield House since I last wrote to you. The opening night reception for our new exhibit, "A Vanished Port: Middletown & the Caribbean, 1750-1824" drew over 130 members and invited guests. I was pleased to receive many positive comments on behalf of our team throughout the evening and on many subsequent days. Visitorship at the museum has exploded and I often find myself giving 3 and 4 tours a day. One day alone we had 56 people eager to learn about Middletown's maritime past. A number of groups have come including college classes, senior citizen day-trippers, and service organizations. I also spoke to the Middlesex Institute for Lifelong Education at Middlesex Community College with over 130 in attendance. Please contact me if you would like to arrange a group visit. We were also honored to be the subject of a video commissioned by our chief funder, Connecticut Humanities, about the making of the exhibit. You can see it at <https://youtu.be/tTbBrbhez1Q>.

A special visitor to the exhibit was William Earle Williams, the renowned photographer, professor, and chronicler of sites portraying African American history. Many of his photographs were displayed in an exhibition at the Davidson Art Center at Wesleyan University and he took the time to tour our exhibit and learn about spots in Middletown related to the Underground Railroad and the Freedom Church.

The first two installments of our special speakers' series were very well attended with 50 people learning about the colonial Atlantic commerce with an emphasis on Connecticut horses from Joseph Avitable and 65 having a lively discussion with Richard Grossman about 18th century currency. Mark your calendars for January 24 and February 22 for the next two lectures.

I was very fortunate to recently attend a conference at Brown University also co-sponsored by the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Race, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. The theme was "Slavery and Global Public History: New Challenges." It was extremely interesting to learn of the challenges that the curators at the newest Smithsonian museum faced in assembling a collection from scratch and deciding how to display the objects in ways that effectively told their stories and significance. Having read about our exhibit in the Hartford Courant, the curator who was the main presenter was very interested to learn how a small institution such as ours is trying to not only tell the true story of our local history, but also generate conversations about racial injustice. Other presenters were from universities and museums in South America and the Caribbean, other regions with legacies of slavery.

As you will read in this newsletter, there is a huge void here at the Society with the departure of Pat Tully to her new home in Alaska. Pat was responsible for keeping the museum open on Saturdays and we are in great need of more docents to at least partially fill her shoes. We have a

(continued on next page)

Directors Letter, continued

small docent crew in place, but would greatly welcome more volunteers. Visitors to the museum are a very interesting group of people who have many stories to tell adding to our knowledge of Middletown's past as they learn what we have to offer. I am happy to train new volunteers and pair you up with veterans. Please give me a call to volunteer.

One of Pat's parting gifts was to completely redesign our website. It is very user friendly and can be found at <https://mchsct.org>. She even included a page highlighting our rose garden and the people who have been honored.

She also recruited Jolee West to help with IT issues. Our computer was over 15 years old, and Jolee has been transferring files to our newly purchased one. Thank you, Jolee!

I wish all of you a happy and healthy 2017 and look forward to seeing you at our upcoming programs.

Best,



Debby Shapiro

Architecture of Eighteenth Century Middletown and the Wetmore House

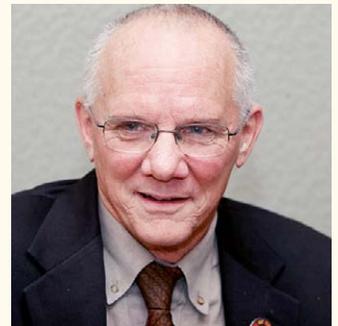
Perched high above Washington Street is Middletown's finest example of Georgian Colonial architecture, the Judge Seth Wetmore House. The painted parlor was of such high quality that it was dismantled and is now on display at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. But the house began on a less elevated and sobering note: the foundation was dug by Judge Wetmore's three enslaved workers, Milt, Cuff, and Will.

In the fourth installment of the "Vanished Port" speakers' series, Bill Hosley will discuss 18th — century Middletown architecture with an emphasis on the Wetmore House. Famous visitors to the house included Aaron Burr, the Marquis de Lafayette, and noted theologians Jonathan Edwards and Timothy Dwight. They would have enjoyed lively conversations in the parlor with its "corner shell cupboard with sun-burst decoration; marbled fluted pilasters at either side of the fireplace opening, and its fine overmantel painting," as described by the Greater Middletown Preservation Trust.

Hosley, the principal of Terra Firma Northeast, is a cultural resource consultant, writer, historian,

preservationist, exhibition developer, and material culture scholar. He was the director of the New Haven Museum and Connecticut Landmarks. Major exhibitions he curated at the Wadsworth Atheneum include *The Great River: Art & Society of the Connecticut Valley* and *Sam & Elizabeth: Legend and Legacy of Colt's Empire*.

This illustrated talk will be held on Wednesday, February 22 at 7:00 pm in the Hubbard Room at Russell Library, 123 Broad Street. 🌿



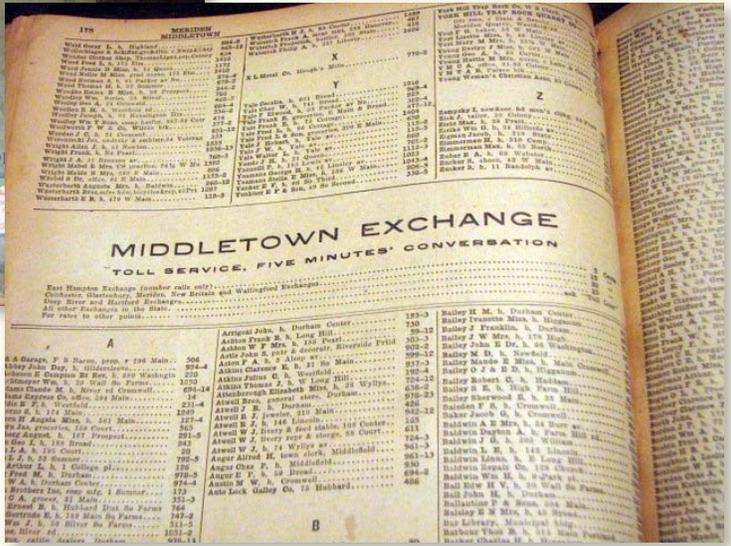
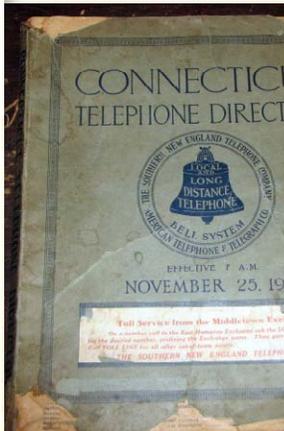
MCHS Collection Continues To Grow . . . *by Sue Ryczek*

The Middlesex County Historical Society houses a collection of many unique, historical objects and archival records that reflect and preserve our local history. These items are relied upon for research and education, as well as the creation of public exhibits enjoyed by students, writers, community members, and curious visitors alike. The collection grows each year, as various items find their way to the Mansfield House through donations by individuals, many of whom cannot bring themselves to discard family heirlooms or objects locally manufactured that have been stored away for years in an attic or basement. Sometimes these items come to us from individuals out-of-area, who have discovered a link to our county. Either way, our collection becomes enriched with the addition of each treasure relevant to Middlesex County history.

- In 2016, there were 24 separate acquisitions, translating into approximately 170 individual objects. Here is just a sampling of items added to our collection this year:
- A 1917 Connecticut Telephone Directory published by The Bell System (ATT/SNET) which contained local and long-distance phone numbers. While this directory covered the entire state, it was still only one-inch thick, and a few listings were just a single digit!
- An automobile luggage rack by Welker-Hoops Manufacturing of Middletown, c.1920. Its steel grid design attached to the vehicle's exterior, while curved extensions held the luggage pieces in place.

- A collapsible, wooden baby's crib purchased upon the birth of Charlotte Porter Brooks in December of 1876, which folds flat and is designed with wide vertical spokes and wheels for easy movement.
- A record book of the Douglas Hose Company No. 1 of Middletown Fire Dept. detailing its membership from 1862 to 1979, as well as fire attendance records and the Company by-laws.
- The personal scrapbook of Isaac Wrubel, founder of Wrubel's Dept. Store, once located on Main St., Middletown. It includes newspaper clippings from the 1900's to 1950's, several of which highlight the career of Wrubel's son, Allie, a Wesleyan graduate and musical composer who found fame in Hollywood, as well as many of the wartime headlines of the 1930's.
- Clothing and personal articles belonging to two local families, including wedding attire, wedding portraits, a shadow-box displaying a crown and veil, and several baby christening outfits, c. 1920-30's.
- Various items originating from the Chafee Hotel, including holiday menus, greeting cards, county liquor licenses issued from 1911-1918, as well as several handwritten letters exchanged between George Chafee, his wife Matilda Pitt Chafee, and their respective family members and friends in the late 1800's.

We cannot wait to see what fascinating items make their way to our collection in 2017. 🍀



Farewell to Pat Tully by Debby Shapiro

People come and go in and out of our busy lives, but no one has been more a part of my life both personally and professionally here at the Historical Society than Pat Tully. Pat left in mid-December on a cross-country journey that will take her to her new job as head of the public library in Ketchikan, Alaska. I already miss her terribly!

Pat joined the Society ten years ago, immediately became an active member, and soon found herself on the Board of Directors. She followed Bill Ryczek as President for four years. One of her main focuses as president was to put the society on a more sound financial footing. To do that, she analyzed years of income and expenditures to project future needs and find our strengths and weaknesses. Acting upon her assessment, she helped organize new fundraising events.

Pat was never afraid to step in to volunteer for our many projects and events. She not only thought of great ideas, but also saw them through. She is rightly famous for single-handedly writing a weekly blog, "150 years ago in Middletown history" for 4 years to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. And when the City Council passed a resolution calling to commemorate the 366th anniversary of the City of Middletown in 2016's leap year of 366 days, Pat stepped up to see that all 366 days were covered with interesting historical stories that went back to the earliest days of our city.

One of Pat's initiatives was conducting a community survey to find out what we could be doing as a society to attract more members and visitors. One frequent request was to be open more hours and on weekends. Pat's answer was

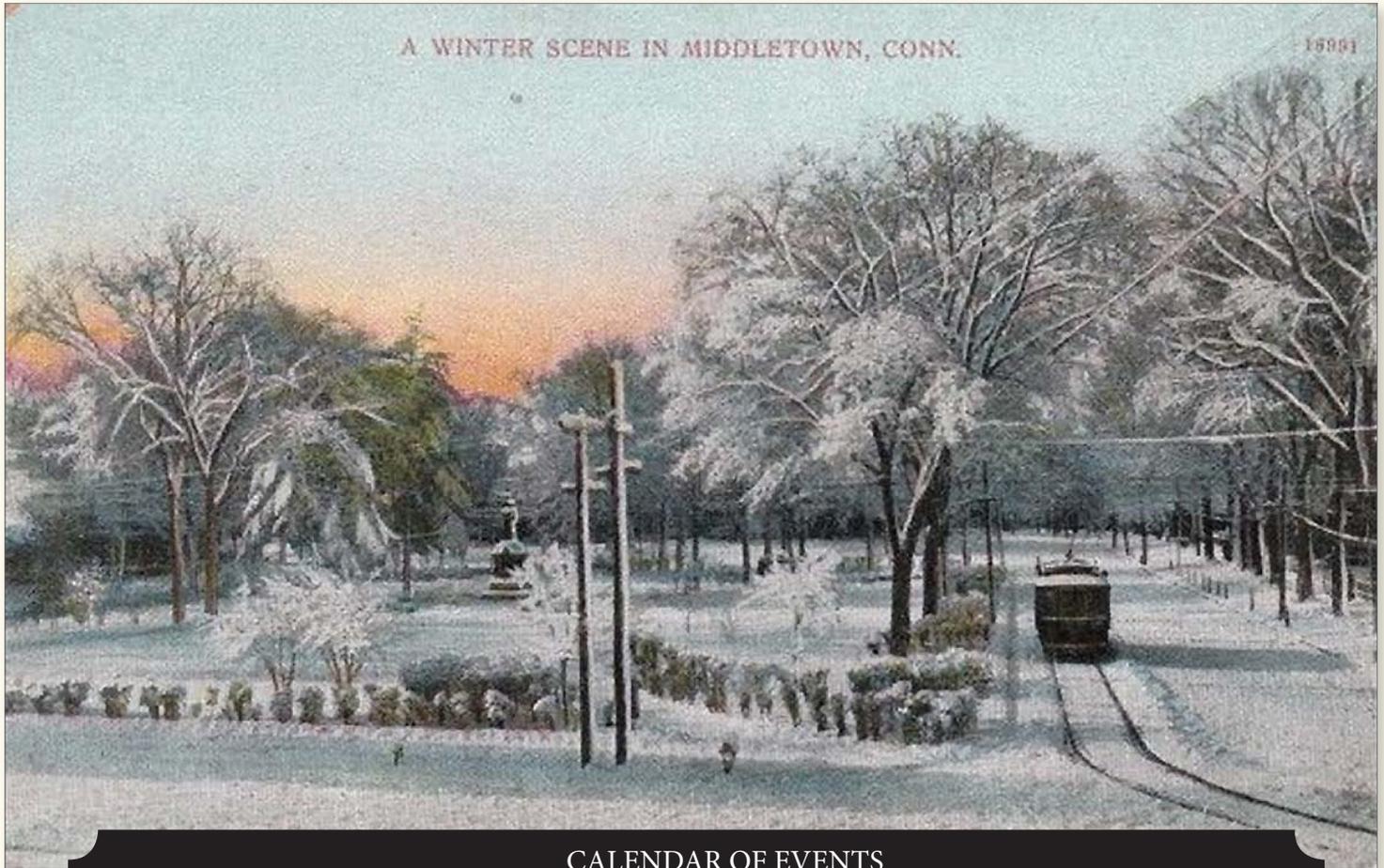
to personally open the Mansfield House every Saturday for two years from 10 to 2 without fail, and she has mentored a new docent crew. She also encouraged us to get involved with other community groups as when we exhibited Middletown's involvement in World War II and hosted a reception for veterans in conjunction with the "One Book One Middletown" reading of the book *Unbroken*.

As a technologically challenged individual, I have special gratitude for Pat's computer skills, keeping our temperamental machinery humming for years. She also did all the tech work for the new exhibit, programming the listening stations and the i-Pad Pro to show the exhibit and logbook videos and the digitized logbooks themselves. She produced the logbook video, designed our new website, and left explicit instructions for its maintenance.

Everyone needs a cheerleader and Pat was mine. People may think that a historical society is a sleepy place, but ours is anything but. The Mansfield House is alive with students, visitors, and volunteers, and every day brings new people to our doors. Pat was always there to keep me energized, tell me I was doing a great job, and fill in when I took my annual vacation. She did all sorts of little things that made my job easier or increased our visibility such as putting the front door sign in a plastic frame so it wouldn't get rained on (why didn't I think of that?), or ordering historical figure rubber ducks to hand out to the trick-or-treaters that came to the Mansfield House in October.

Pat is one-of-a-kind and we all wish her well as she embarks on her newest adventure. I told her that she would soon charm the citizens of Ketchikan as she charmed us, making Ketchikan a better place to live as she made Middletown. Godspeed, Pat, and our thanks always!





CALENDAR OF EVENTS

The Museum at the Mansfield House

OPEN Monday – Thursday and Saturday
10:00 to 2:00

**Ships for the Trade & the Rise of the
Middletown Customs Port**

Tuesday, January 24, 2017
7:00 pm

Hubbard Room, Russell Library

The Wetmore House

Wednesday, February 22

Hubbard Room, Russell Library

7:00 pm

For more information, visit us on the web at <https://mchsct.org>