

River and Sound

Issue 3 Winter 2008

Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.
"The history of Old Lyme—the people of Old Lyme"



Society's plans for 2008: Tours, publications, community outreach



Old Lyme historian John Pfeiffer
leading a tour of Ely Cemetery, one of
several slave burial sites in our area.

Photo: Debbie Beckwith

In 2005 the Old Lyme Historical Society was little more than an idea shared by a small group of people. Less than three years later, at 120 members strong, we have produced well-received exhibits, programs, and publications—all part of our mission to preserve and analyze Old Lyme's social, civic, economic, and political past. At the start of 2008, we are pleased to describe some of the highlights of the past year.

- In June we published our second monograph: *This Ancient and Interesting Town*, a reprint of an 1876 article in *Harper's* magazine that describes some of Old Lyme's best-known residents. The monograph is illustrated with etchings from the original article. Also last year, our first monograph—*Poverty Island*, a Depression-era memoir by Neri A. Clark—sold out, so we went into a second printing, which, like the first one, features illustrations by Old Lyme artist Catherine Christiano.
- Last year we continued our research project on the descendants of Old Lyme's founding families. At least one-third of these families still have a presence here. The work will culminate in a monograph.
- Also in 2007 our popular program of local cemetery tours continued under the expert guidance of two historians, Hiram Maxim of Lyme and John Pfeiffer of Old Lyme. They led visits to Lord Cemetery, Duck River Cemetery, and two cemeteries—Ely Cemetery and a cemetery on Beaver Brook Road—where slaves are buried. Additional tours are planned this year.

None of these accomplishments would have been possible without the financial support of the Town of Old Lyme, nor without the assistance of our members. With your continued help, financial and otherwise, we look forward to enabling everyone in Old Lyme—families and students, newcomers and long-time residents, year-round residents and visitors—to connect with our town's rich history.

With best wishes for 2008,

Tom Schellens
Chairman, Old Lyme Historical Society

INFORMATION & OPPORTUNITIES

To our members *We need you!*

To help us grow. As the OLHSI expands, so does our need for volunteer assistance. We welcome our members' participation in the following areas:

- Program
- Education
- Archives
- Hospitality
- Print media and website
- Public relations

To share recollections of 1938. As we prepare for a 70th-anniversary observance of the 1938 hurricane, we are grateful to the many Old Lyme residents who have described the event to us. We encourage additional OLHSI members to tell us their stories.

To get involved in these areas, or to learn about other ways of working with the OLHSI, please contact one of our board members — either **Wendy Brainerd** (434-0694; wmbraingerd@sbcglobal.net) or **Bob Dunn** (434-6492; WDunn1@aol.com). Thank you.

Owners of historic houses find a helping hand

How do you know what's best for your old house? Could you use some advice in deciding how to preserve and maintain its historic character? Historic New England, the oldest regional preservation organization in the United States, has introduced a special membership category for owners of historic houses of any size, type, condition, or style—from Georgian farmhouses and Federal mansions to Arts and Crafts bungalows and Modernist ranches.

The "Historic Homeowner" membership offers individualized access to expertise in such issues confronting as updating a kitchen, finding a suitable paint color scheme, and locating a specialty supplier for fixtures and details. Members receive an annual online consultation, additional technical assistance, specialty e-newsletters, and invitations to workshops on old-house maintenance, as well as Historic New England's standard membership benefits. To join, log onto the website, at www.HistoricNewEngland.org.

Did you know... ?

(the first segment in a planned series)

The Sill House

Built in 1817 for John Sill and Abby Noyes Sill on ancestral land on Lyme Street, the Still house is a fine example of late Georgian architecture. Designed by Samuel Belcher, it has a hipped roof, a symmetrical façade and chimneys, a Palladian window, and a graceful curving staircase.

Mr. Sill, a notorious Customs runner, had secret closets built into the house to conceal fine silks, satins, and laces. In 1820, after he was arrested for his questionable business dealings, the house was sold to William Noyes.

In 1822 Charles Johnson McCurdy purchased the house. McCurdy, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate and U.S. representative at the Court of the Hapsburgs in Vienna, later became a judge of the Superior Court of Connecticut.

In 1860 the house was sold to William Bisland of New Orleans, who in 1866 sold it to Joseph Selden Huntington of New York.

During the 20th century the house had numerous owners until 1983, when the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts purchased the property from the Robert Carter family. A plaque produced by the OLHSI for the Academy will be dedicated on Memorial Day.



FOR OLHSI MEMBERS

Recalling Old Lyme's merchants

The photographs below, taken by writer and OLHSI member **John Stratton**, are of the reverse side of the canvas backdrop hanging at the back of the stage at the Old Lyme Grange. The backdrop depicts businesses that were operating here in the 1920s.

As the OLHSI contemplates a research project on these merchants, we recognize the huge potential benefit of reminiscences provided by our members who were in Lyme and Old Lyme during at time. Please contact John, at jpstratton@snet.net, if you have recollections that you would like to share.



In memoriam: Hiram Maxim

The OLHSI is saddened by the death on January 12, 2008, of Hiram Maxim. As Lyme town historian—a position he had held since 1995—Hiram researched more than 70 of the town's historic houses and restored several of its 26 cemeteries.

One of the cemeteries that Hiram restored—Lord Cemetery on Route 156, which dates back to at least 1734—was the site of a tour he led for the Society last June. He noted that, as was the case with other local cemeteries, people there were buried close to where they died, on private plots that belonged to families or friends. In an August 2002 article in the *Main Street News*, he commented, "As a final resting place for several generations of Lyme families, these historic sites reflect the human efforts, successes, failures, sacrifices, leadership and spirit that inspired and defined Lyme's culture."

Contributions in honor of Hiram may be made to the Lyme Public Hall Association, 249 Hamburg Road, Lyme, CT 06371.

First settlers project

Society receives a treasure trove: Peckham family Civil War letters

One of the Society's current activities is a research project about the descendants of the founding families who settled in the area originally called East Saybrook, which became known as Lyme, and ultimately, Lyme and Old Lyme. Members of our Archive Committee have unearthed information regarding families who served in the Revolutionary War, those who returned to England, and those who served in subsequent wars.

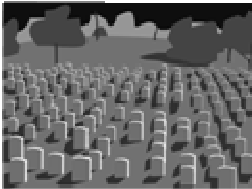
This winter marked a giant step forward in this project, as we obtained details about one of these families: the Peckhams. Judy Parr of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, is the great-great-great-granddaughter of Isaac and Fanny Maria Peckham, who are buried in Duck River Cemetery. Judy, who learned about the OLHSI through our website, has generously given us four letters belong to her. The letters were written during the Civil War, in 1862 and 1863, to the Peckhams' great-grandson, who was serving in the war. Written by his mother and two other female relatives, the letters reported family and town news, including references to other local young men who were fighting in the war. (More details about the Peckham family and these letters will appear in future issues of this newsletter.) Noted Ms. Parr, "The reason I'm donating the letters is so they can live for scholars and people in the community."

Until our own archive is up and running, we will be storing the letters in the temperature- and humidity-controlled archive of our sister organization, the Lyme Public Hall Association. We are indebted to Ms. Parr for giving us the letters and to Carol Bacdayan, the Lyme Association's archivist, for offering us this temporary storage space.

UPDATES

Coming events

Check your mailbox for details of these and events scheduled for this spring!

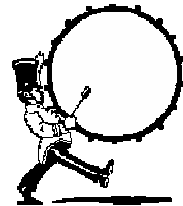


Local cemetery tours

Join Old Lyme historian John Pfeiffer as he leads more visits to burial sites in Lyme and Old Lyme.

Memorial Day parade

Look for the OLHSI contingent as we ride in a Roaring 20s-era touring car (1922 Model T). After the parade we will dedicate the plaque for the Sill house (see page 2 of this issue).



OLHSI annual meeting

Gather with us in June as we celebrate our accomplishments and formulate plans for the coming year.

Scheduled publications

Plans are under way to publish more monographs, including the two described here. Both were conceived by John Mitchell, who was working on them at the time of his death in July 2007. The retired environmental editor of *National Geographic* magazine, chaired the Society's publications program and edited our first two monographs.

1938 hurricane

On Sunday, September 21 of this year—the 70th anniversary of the hurricane that swept through the region—we will publish a monograph commemorating the event.

Tapes from oral histories of townspeople who were present during the storm, along with photographs, newspaper articles, letters, and written accounts will be included in an exhibit about the hurricane. We are hoping to collaborate with other historical societies in the lower Connecticut River valley to stage the exhibit.



Local land preservation

Scheduled for publication in spring 2009 is *Landsavers of the Lymes*. The monograph is planned as a historical overview of the history of local land preservation, including the role of American Impressionist artists in identifying and applying to canvas many beautiful vistas that have been preserved. The project, which was conceived by John Mitchell, is a collaboration with the local conservation trusts and the Florence Griswold Museum.



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SOME HIGHLIGHTS OF 2007



OLHSI secretary Alison Mitchell addresses guests at the June 2007 party launching the monograph, This Ancient and Interesting Town.



OLHSI member Burnham Carter reads from the monograph.



John Pfeiffer, at left, speaks to tour participants at Ely Cemetery.

Photo: Debbie Beckwith

The Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.

was established in 2005 to preserve and analyze the social, civic, economic, and political past of the Town of Old Lyme over its 330 years.

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P.O. Box 352, Old Lyme, CT 06371

www.OLHSI.org

Join us in bringing Old Lyme's past to the present!

Please become an OLHSI member or renew your membership

*The OLHSI gratefully accepts contributions or loans of town and family memorabilia.
Membership fees and other donations are fully tax-deductible.*

____ *New member* ____ *Renewing member*

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