

River and Sound

Issue 4 Summer 2008

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



Society gets its own office!

Rental agreement with PGN Library provides a room with a view

At a May 16 reception, the Old Lyme Historical Society officially opened its new office in the Old Lyme Room ("Genealogy Room") at the Old Lyme–Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library. Earlier this spring the Society entered into an agreement with the Library for part-time use of the room.

Commented OLHSI chair Alison Mitchell, "We are thrilled that the Library board of directors is willing to allow us use of their historic building as our first public headquarters. This will enable the Society to have a fully equipped office, be more accessible to the community, and assess if this fledgling organization is ready to test its wings. The Society looks forward to doing joint programs with the Library, among them educational programs on nearby history."

The initial agreement states that for a nominal fee the Society will have use of the room from 10 a.m. to noon three days a week: Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. OLHSI board and general members have volunteered to staff the room—which, thanks to generous donations of labor and equipment from OLHSI board member Bob Dunn and local businessmen Mike Swaney and Charlie Delinks, has been supplied with a computer, a printer and cartridges, a telephone, and file cabinets.

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PGN Library board president David Winer, Library director Mary Fiorelli, and OLHSI board chair Alison Mitchell



Charlie Delinks with office equipment he donated to the OLHSI

News flash:

*Please stop by the OLHSI office to take a chance on a **raffle prize**, to be awarded on September 21.*

*The winner will receive a first-edition signed copy of the **monograph on the 1938 hurricane** (see page 2 of this issue for details).*

Photos: Bernadette Niedermeier

Mark your calendars!
Recalling the 1938 hurricane



This September marks the 70th anniversary of the hurricane of 1938, which devastated parts of southeastern Connecticut, including Old Lyme's beaches. In observance of the anniversary, the White Sands Beach Community Center on Old Shore Road will be the site of an OLHSI exhibit, starting Friday, September 19 and concluding Sunday, October 5.

Muffie Whitley has supervised a series of interviews with local residents who lived through the hurricane. The exhibit will feature tapes of their eyewitness accounts, manuscripts about the impact of the storm, plus photographs, newspaper clippings, postcards, and other ephemera. Members of the Garvin family have loaned the Society a scrapbook that describes in graphic detail the destruction of Hawk's Neck Beach.

The hurricane reached Old Lyme in the afternoon of September 21. To commemorate the event, the OLHSI will host a reception, also at the Community Center, on Sunday, September 21, from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. At the reception the Society's new monograph, *The Hurricane of 1938: 70 Years Later, Old Lyme Remembers*, will go on sale, and the monograph's writer, Michele Dickey, will sign copies. Dyanne Rafal is chairing plans for the reception.

The exhibit and the reception are open to the public. Admission to both is free.

**Historian John Pfeiffer tells captivating tales
of "legalized piracy"**

As part of its series of talks on the history of Old Lyme and its environs, the OLHSI welcomed a capacity crowd to the Lymes' Senior Center on March 7 for a lecture and slide presentation, "Privateers on the Shoreline," by Old Lyme historian John Pfeiffer.

Dr. Pfeiffer noted that the term "privateering" is synonymous with "piracy." And for residents of Old Lyme and nearby coastal towns, he declared, "privateering is in our blood." Drawing on documents, maps, and photos, as well as his own archaeological research (including a shipwreck off Griswold Point), he explained that in the 17th century, privateering was widespread—and lawful. For a European merchant, it was a simple matter to obtain a "letter of marque" from the monarch or head of state, authorizing the seizure of material from a ship galleon for sale at auction back home.

Along North America's east coast the first privateers appeared around 1600, not long before settlements were established. Towns like Old Lyme, Old Saybrook, and Essex each had their own dock; in addition, an active shipbuilding industry, and the ease of traveling out to sea and returning to safe harbor, made the lower Connecticut River valley a popular location for privateering. The practice ceased only with the War of 1812, as the British focused on this area—and, in 1814, lodged an assault that resulted in the destruction of 28 ships.

Added attractions at the Senior Center on March 7 were grub (a scrumptious dinner catered by Coffee's Country Market) and grog. The Society is making DVD copies of the event available to local schools, and John Pfeiffer is planning to give another presentation for the OLHSI—on a subject to be announced—next winter.



*John Pfeiffer receives a bottle of grog from
OLHSI board member Tim Griswold*

Photo: George Young

OLHSI annual meeting
Celebrating three years, planning many more

General members and friends joined the OLHSI board in the Community Room at the PGN Library on Monday, June 16, for the Society’s annual meeting. In addition to reporting the past year’s accomplishments and announcing planned events, the OLHSI welcomed Ken Levin, co-chair of the Old Lyme Historic District Commission, as the featured speaker. Ken’s informative presentation helped dispel confusion about the respective roles of the Commission and the Society. Copies of the Commission’s handbook are available in the OLHSI office.

Also at the meeting the chairman’s annual award—to the individual or institution who has helped preserve the history of Old Lyme—was presented to board member Bob Dunn, who expertly oversees the OLHSI’s programs and publicity. Bob received a framed print of one of Catherine Christiano’s illustrations for the Society’s first monograph, *Poverty Island* (2006). A semi-retired chemical pharmacologist, Bob came to Old Lyme with his family in 1996. Noted board chair Alison Mitchell in making the award, “You don’t have to be an Old Lyme native to love our town’s history.”



Bob Dunn
 Photo: George Young

Did you know...?

(a recurring feature about an Old Lyme historical building or artifact)



“Lyme, 1908.”

Photo: T.S. Bronson

The building known as the Corner Store, at the corner of Lyme Street and Ferry Road East (across the street from the Congregational Church), was built in 1838 for Daniel Roger Noyes as a general store on the site of Stephen Peck’s garden. Now occupying the site is a beautiful garden on Wendy and Stanford Brainerd’s property.

The building later became Champion’s General Store. In the early 1920s it was turned into an A&P, with a bright red front typical of most stores in that chain. There were many A&Ps then—at least six in New London alone. These were not the supermarkets of today, just small grocery stores.

In the mid-1930s A&P managers decided to move the store to larger quarters across from the Old Lyme–Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library. Opposition came from the town fathers—among them such well-known figures as pastor Dixon Hoag, lawyer Ray Bigelow, and Harry Champion, owner of the Old Lyme Inn on Ferry Road—who did not want a red storefront on Lyme Street. So a group of them arranged for a meeting with an A&P vice

president in Springfield, Mass.

After much deliberation, the company accepted their position, and the new store was painted white, in keeping with the rest of the town. (A&P executives subsequently decided that all its stores in New England would be white, launching a new trend for the company!) In the late 1950s the A&P moved to the town’s new shopping center on Halls Road, now the Old Lyme Marketplace. The store remains there to this day.

—Jim Noyes

Society joins other marchers in Memorial Day parade

With representatives of numerous other Old Lyme organizations, the Society paraded along Lyme Street to the Duck River Cemetery on Memorial Day 2008.

Shown below, on the right, is board member Jim Noyes in his vintage Jeep.

The OLHSI distributed 1,500 small American flags to parade viewers.



Photo: Olwen Logan

Old Lyme's Great Island has ornithological significance

The black rail—an elusive bird with a frog-like song—typically builds its nests in salt meadows, although no farther north than southeastern Long Island.



According to Old Lyme nature photographer Bill Burt, however, this rare species did nest in Connecticut in the late 19th century (the furthest north sighting): on Great Island in Old Lyme, to be exact.

Bill Burt notes that local resident Judge John N. Clark knew of five nests in Old Lyme and Old Saybrook. This was an extraordinary number for any species of rail, especially in an area as small as the Connecticut River estuary. Judge Clark found two nests, one of which contained nine eggs. It was located in a patch of stiff bristly grass that had not been mowed for several years.

Society gets its own office

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Although the Old Lyme–Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library, established in 1897 as a free public library, receives just 40 percent of its budget from Old Lyme, it serves as the public library for the town. Many civic organizations, the OLHSI among them, have appreciated the opportunity to use the Library's Community Room for meetings and events.

David Winer, PGN board president, said, "The Library board voted unanimously to grant the Old Lyme Historical Society use of our facility. We see it as a synergistic partnership, and we think that Phoebe will be smiling down on both organizations." Added Library director Mary Fiorelli, "We get many inquiries regarding the history of Old Lyme, and see the Society's onsite presence as an additional resource."

—Thanks to Olwen Logan, *LymeLine.com* editor, who contributed reporting for this article



Enjoying the opening-day reception

Photo: Bernadette Niedermeier

OLHSI SUPPORTS LOCAL RESEARCH PROJECTS

The Old Lyme schools

OLHSI board member Jim Noyes is organizing a group of writers to produce a history of the Old Lyme schools from 1855, when school records were first kept, to 1934, when Center School on Main Street was built. One writer, Barbara Bair, is doing her own research, which includes interviews of local residents who were students here in the 1920s and 1930s. Among her initial findings:

- *In its earliest years Old Lyme had only one-room schoolhouses, for grades 1 through 8. The youngest children learned a lot in a short time because they would listen to the older students as the teacher moved through the classroom.*

- *Students traveled to school by railroad and trolley car.*

- *As recently as the 1890s, 60 percent of students in New London County could not write. And until around 1900, Old Lyme's teachers—considered "rural educators"—did not receive an advanced education. After the turn of the century, however, schooling in Old Lyme progressed rapidly.*

To provide information or recollections about Old Lyme's schools in the 1920s and 1930s, please call Barbara, at 434-7560.

The Peck Tavern House

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries the Peck Tavern—at 1 Sill Lane, adjacent to the Post Road (Route 1)—was a major stopping place on the main thoroughfare along Connecticut's shoreline.

Nathaniel C. Duncan, a 2008 graduate of Old Lyme High School and a member of the family that bought the house last year, conducted a structural and social history of the building for his senior-year project. In summarizing the history, Nat notes:

"The history of the Peck Tavern House is almost as old as the history of this country. As amazing as the structure is... and as amazing as it is that the building is still standing—through hurricanes, wars, Depression, bugs, and decay—the people who have lived in the house and the fortune the house has enjoyed are more amazing.... What is amazing to me, having [been] studying the history of the home and people who have lived in it, is the fact that it has lived for 328 years. May we only hope that the next 328 years of this home's life are full of people who care for its existence as much as it has cared for the existence of the town."

We are most grateful to Nat for his thoughtful work, and we encourage visitors to our new office to read his report in full. A sample of his findings:

- *The tavern was opened by John Peck, a sea captain with a lucrative trade in the West Indies who bought the house in 1769.*

- *One of the granite markers installed in 1753 by Benjamin Franklin along the Post Road indicating distances to major cities is located just south of the tavern, reading "14 M NL": 14 miles to New London.*

- *The tavern's store, owned by local political writer John McCurdy, was the only one between Guilford and New London during the pre-Revolutionary War period.*

- *During his stay at the McCurdy house in 1776, George Washington—an enthusiastic ballroom dancer—enjoyed an evening at the town's ballroom, on the tavern's second floor.*

- *Also staying at the McCurdy house (in 1777) was General Lafayette; his troops, who slept on the Congregational Church green, patronized the store, with its goods from local farmers, wives, and merchants.*

- *From the 1930s through World War II, the house was on loan to the Old Lyme Art Guild and served as the setting for pottery, metalworking, weaving, and handcrafts studios.*

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Membership fees and other donations are fully tax-deductible.

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*The OLHSI is a non-profit corporation incorporated in
the State of Connecticut.*

*It is a registered charity with the state Department of Consumer
Protection and is recognized by the IRS for 501(c)(3) status.*

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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