



# Chester Historical Society

Fall 2020 Newsletter

## Remembering... When the Trolley Rolled into Chester

It was a snowy and cold evening in January 1914, when the single lumbering trolley car eased off of Route 154, rolled down the freshly raised track along the Pataconk Creek and slowed near the blacksmith shop at the entrance to Laurel Hill Cemetery. There, waiting in the frosty air, the Chester Military Band stamped the chill from their feet and warmed their hands before striking up a tune to lead the procession the final distance down Main Street, where a crowd waited anxiously to begin the celebration.

"The houses all along (the route) were brilliantly lit," said Kate Silliman, whose memories have been archived by the Chester Historical Society. "There were red fires burning; skyrockets were shooting in every direction; the band was playing."

After rounding a final curve, the parade stopped in front of what is now Leif Nilsson's gallery and studio, where the word "Chester" had been written with white stones embedded in a small retaining wall announcing the end of the line, and a new beginning: Chester had a trolley. But for how long?

Intertwined with the story of the rise and fall of the Shore Line Electric Railway, which owned and operated the trolley, are real-world economics. At the time, the trolley was in direct competition with other emerging trends in transportation, including the steam train and early automobiles. But the trolley had a few advantages; it was directly in town and it ran on an hourly schedule.



Tracks being laid in 1913 along Middlesex Turnpike near St. Joseph Church in preparation for the extension of trolley service to Chester in early 1914. (Hugh Spencer photo from Society archives)



The 1914 arrival of trolley service to Chester Center attracted many residents, including this group of boys. Note the 'Welcome' banner in the background. (Hugh Spencer photo from Society archives)

"It made it a lot more convenient," said Bruce Edgerton, a local railroad enthusiast who has researched the SLER. "You didn't have to go to a station."

The trolley was also used to move freight between towns, which gave local farmers and businesses access to larger commercial markets. When the swinging bridge in East Haddam was finished in 1913, tracks were even laid across the span, Edgerton said. Though the trolley never made it that far, the foresight shows the enthusiasm local leaders had for the system.

The SLER was the brainchild of financier Morton F. Plant. Starting in 1910 he began buying up rail lines. When the tracks came to Chester, the network was at its apogee, with connections to New Haven, New London and the Massachusetts border. Electricity was generated by a power plant in Old Saybrook nestled on the Connecticut River, which delivered 11,000 volts via two steam turbines.

You really have to imagine the town as it was then, said Keith Dauer, a member of the Chester Historical Society's board of trustees. Business was booming, and people were traveling daily from nearby towns for work at the mills, which were producing everything from crochet needles to ink wells using the power of rushing water.

(Cont. on next page)

"There must have been enough people coming in that (the trolley company) thought it was going to be worthwhile when they first planned it," Dauer said. "And it helped the growth of industry here and it brought skilled workers in. Chester was pretty isolated then."

The early years of the trolley must have been idyllic, with the roots of rural agriculture mixing with what was, at the time, bleeding-edge technology. The spirit is captured by the trolley's cattle guard, the sloped metal grate at the front of the car preventing livestock from ending up under the heavy wheels. The tracks, which were built flush with the unpaved road, had to be fenced-off in places to keep out wandering animals. When the tracks ran directly in the road, the trolley's speed was limited to that of other traffic, including horses. In open stretches, it likely reached up to 35 mph. But stuck behind a horse plodding up a hill, the trolley slowed to a crawl.

Nevertheless, you could ride from Ivoryton to Chester in 20 minutes, according to an old schedule, or get all the way to New Haven in a little less than three hours.

The future, however, was anything but smooth sailing, Edgerton said. "They had a lot of labor issues," he said. "A lot of the people they were hiring were not necessarily of the highest caliber. Safety became a real issue and there were a few really bad accidents." One such crash in North Branford killed 17 people.

Some of the workers abused alcohol, Edgerton said, and management was lackadaisical when it came to the technical challenges of operating a large rail network. There may have been other motivations as well. Most of the money used to start the railroad came from wealthy connections in the utilities business, and an electric train required infrastructure to move energy. "By opening an electric railroad, it allowed them to open power companies to run cars," Edgerton said. "Most lights at the time were acetylene gas, so this gave them a monopoly. By bringing power right through the center of towns you could supply it to homes and businesses and offices."



This Hugh Spencer photo captures the changes in transportation in 1914: a horse and buggy, a gas pump and the 'Chester wall' terminus of the trolley line. The Chester Hotel is above the wall.

By 1920, it was all over and the tracks were pulled up in many places to sell for scrap. In other places, they were paved over and buried. "The trolley was a huge deal, then in five years it was gone," Dauer said. "It probably took as long to build as it was in town."

About five years ago, a few pieces of old track were discovered by Bruce Watrous, a lifelong Chester resident. "I was walking from the center of town to the post office and it was part of the road construction. I looked down in the hole; there it was," he said in a *New London Day* interview.

*Sam Cooper*

As part of the Main Street renovations completed over the past summer, two sections of steel track were embedded in front of the Chester wall as a reminder of this interesting piece of town history.


## Society Adds Three Trustees

The Annual Membership Meeting of the Chester Historical Society was held on the evening of October 24 and was, historically, the first virtual annual meeting in the Society's 50 years.

Three new members - Sam Cooper, Cheri Ferrari Habersang and Paul Sweeney - were approved to serve 3-year terms. At the same time, outgoing trustees Marta Daniels (6 years) and Tom Marshall (3) were recognized for their valuable contributions to Chester's history. Marta's exploration of Judge Constance Baker Motley's career of activism was the basis for a Society exhibit as well as the educational programs Marta presents throughout the region. Tom's longtime interest and collection of Silliman inkstands led to a wholesale enhancement of our upstairs exhibit and a popular public presentation. Both Marta and Tom have also been hosts of the Society's YouTube videos.

2020 Board of Trustees: Bob Blair, Tim Carlson, Sam Cooper, Keith Dauer, Sandy Senior-Dauer (V. Pres.), Cheri Ferrari Habersang, Paulette Heft, Skip Hubbard (Archivist), Cary Hull (President), Jenny Kitsen (V. Pres.), Mitch Koslawy, Diane Lindsay (Curator), Ed Meehan (V. Pres.), Rob Miceli (Historian), Martin Nadel (Robbie Collomore Music Series), JoAnne Park (Treas.), Dawn Parker, Mike Sanders, Paul Sweeney, Nancy Watkins (Sec.), Bruce Watrous.

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# It Was in the Stars: \$8,500 Directed for Pandemic Relief

It was late October, the last day of the 2019 museum season, when Christopher Owens came to look at the exhibits. Board Member Dawn Parker was volunteering as a greeter and struck up what would turn out to be a magical conversation. When asking where Christopher lived, Dawn recognized the house because it was always so beautifully decorated for the holidays with large stars aglow with white lights. That connection initiated what became two incredible Society fundraisers.



Knowing that the Society was planning a major capital improvement campaign, Dawn asked Christopher if he would be interested in collaborating on a project similar to one he did in Vermont years ago. That started the "Light Up the Night" winter fundraiser with 85 stars soon selling throughout Chester. The winter nights were brightened, and the Society had a financial head start for outdoor lighting at its museum.

However, a wider impact came in the Spring. As the news of COVID-19 grew, people brought their stars back out as a sign of hope and solidarity. These gestures led to another round of star-building with sales to benefit tri-town households financially impacted by the pandemic. At its conclusion on Sept. 30, our "Stars for Hope" project raised over \$8,500, which was converted into \$25 Adams Food Store gift cards.

Local churches, social workers and community members were the conduits to getting the gift cards to needy households. Stories of the stars were shared in Zip06, the Middletown Press and Channel 3 WFSB TV news focusing on the wonderful work the community did to support each other.

To see the impact Stars for Hope had on the tri-town community, keep your eyes on the Chester Historical Society's website and Facebook page for an upcoming video in which Valley Regional student Hannah Jenkins interviews local residents and highlights the stars experience. Let's hope the stars will shine throughout towns for years to come, reminding us that we are all in this together, helping light even the darkest of times.

*Dawn Parker*



## "Chasing Squirrels"

Walk into Chester history with this new app, created and designed by Rebecca Joslow MacGregor in coordination with the Merchants of Chester. The initial walk, "Up North," guides you through eight sites from the Town Center to the Meeting House, a distance of less than 4/10s of a mile. A second walk, "Out West," is expected in late October.

To connect, go to [www.chesterhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.chesterhistoricalsociety.org) and click the top of the page to begin your next adventure.

# Visit Anytime: Museum Expands with New Outdoor Attractions

The summer of COVID-19 may have closed the interior of Chester Museum at The Mill, but it didn't prevent installation of several outdoor displays from our growing collection. The new items, with signage and story, have appeal for all ages. There are no hours other than daylight; we encourage a visit as you walk or drive by.



The new exhibit features Harvesting in Chester, both from the land and from the water. At the left are two plows, a small horse-drawn plow and a colorful stump plow from a former Cedar Lake farm, restored by member Bill Myers. In the center are two implements, one horse-drawn, the other motorized, used to harvest ice from the frozen waters of West Chester. In addition, new signage (far right) describes the stone retaining walls initially built in 1817 for the Chester-North Killingworth Turnpike (West Main Street / Route 148). The new exhibits join a Chester Center water trough (right center) and the Waterhouse Millstones at the museum entrance.

# Celebrating 100 Years of Women's Achievements

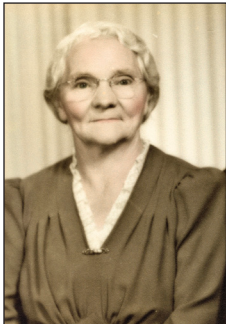
This fall, we are working on a project with Deep River and Essex Historical Societies in honor of the Women's Suffrage Centennial, titled "Celebrating 100 Years of Women's Achievements."

We are soliciting photos of women from our three towns from over the past 100+ years who have made (or are currently making) a difference in our communities in some way. These women do not need to be "famous." They can be mothers, volunteers, teachers, storeowners – as long as you consider them "notable."

Please scan a photo (or we'll borrow your photo to scan it and will then return), and email it to us, high-resolution. Write a very brief description of why you think this woman is notable. The end result will be a free slide show presentation for our website (and next summer will be shown in our museum). Please note that these photos will become part of our archives and will be visible through social media. If you should have questions, please email us at [chesterchistoricalociety@gmail.com](mailto:chesterchistoricalociety@gmail.com) or call Diane Lindsay at 860-526-2443.

Here are a few of Chester's "notable" women, written by the person named in italics.

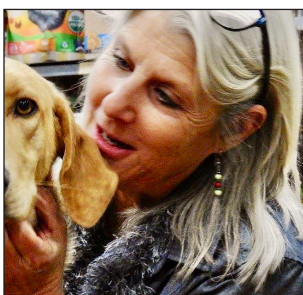
**Denise Learned** is the Executive Director of Camp Hazen YMCA. She arrived at Camp as a 'staff kid' in the late 1950s and has been a part of its growth since then. She was a counselor in the 1970, when Camp went coed, and then Program Director. After a time as Director of the Saybrook Soup Kitchen, Denise returned to Hazen as Executive Director. With Denise as its enthusiastic leader, Camp Hazen has increased its community involvement, year-round youth programs, campership financial aid and facility upgrades." – *Bruce Watrous*



**Liberata (Agnelli) Narducci** was born in Italy in 1882 and came to New York as a child. She grew up there, worked in a candy shop, and married Giovanni (John) Narducci in 1900. In 1903 they followed her parents, Rose and Joseph Agnelli, to Chester. Liberata raised ten children and also a granddaughter. During WWII she had 5 sons in the service, losing one son, and becoming a Gold Star Mother. Liberata was a wonderful cook, known for her handmade ravioli and polenta. She hosted weekly Sunday dinners for her adult children and their families for years. She had a huge garden at her Straits Road house. She enjoyed watching the filming of the Doris Day movie from her backyard. She, and her wheelbarrow, made it into the movie."

– *Diane Narducci Lindsay*

**Gloria Eustis** moved to Chester with her husband and two daughters in 1971. After a few years of volunteering in local school libraries, she became Head Librarian of Chester Public Library in 1984. Over 18 years, she helped the library blossom by expanding the collection into various print and multimedia formats, introducing the first computers for public access, spearheading the popular Mark Johnston book discussions, and tripling the library's circulation. She retired in 2002. Gloria's lifetime efforts of social activism included the environmental protection of Long Island Sound; the Shoreline Nuclear Arms Freeze and Valley Shore Peace Advocate newsletter; and the 'adoption' of the Guadalupe Day Care in Leon, Nicaragua in association with the New Haven Sister City Project. Gloria passed away in 2016." – *Tammy Eustis*



"When does she sleep?! Every Sunday morning from mid-June to the end of October, **Sue Hotkowski** is in Chester Center, setting up and masterminding the Chester Sunday Market, of which she is the manager. All year long, she runs Homeward Bound CT, a nonprofit that raises funds for dog rescues and shelters, while helping find homes for their dogs. Sue also organizes the Chester Dog Fair every fall, and every spring the Spay It Forward fundraiser to raise funds for neutering and spaying shelter dogs. Anyone looking for the right dog, or any dog looking for the right family knows Sue is on their side, Sue cares." – *Cary Hull*



“**Elizabeth ‘Beth’ Lucie** grew up in New York City in a family involved in city politics. Her father worked with Mayor Jimmy Walker and Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt. But it was her first job working with John Foster Dulles, future Secretary of State, that pulled her into politics. After moving full-time to Chester, Beth served her town as: co-chair for the building of Chester Elementary School in 1960, ran the Selectmen’s office for years, Assistant Town Treasurer, and later 18 years as Town Treasurer. While not born and brought up here, Chester was Beth’s home.” – *Donald Perreault*

“It must run in the family: **Bettie Perreault’s** grandfather was the mayor of Emerson, New Jersey; her father served as Chair of Chester’s Board of Finance; and her mother (Beth Lucie) ran the Selectmen’s office for years, serving first as Assistant Town Treasurer before holding the Treasurer’s position for many years. Chester’s government was a part of Bettie’s life from childhood. Through the years Bettie served as Chair of the Planning & Zoning Commission in the 1970s and ‘80s, then as the first woman to serve as First Selectman for two terms, and two decades later to return to serve as Chair of the Board of Fire Commissioners and Secretary on the Planning & Zoning Commission.” – *Donald Perreault*



“**Helen (Montana) Zanardi** couldn’t resist a just cause. Rolling bandages for the Red Cross, aiding the family of a child struck with cancer, involvement with St. Joseph’s Church and the Kings Daughters, contributing to the many food sales (she was famous for her minestrone), she was there. If there was no cause, she’d invent one. Fluent in the Northern-Italian dialect common to Chester’s Italian immigrants, she was a favorite of the town’s older Italian ladies, most of them widows. She delighted in baking and decorating cakes (including wedding cakes). Involvement in the annual Carnevale party was another passion. She was 63 when she passed, sent off with an overflow crowd at her funeral at St. Joe’s. It seemed everybody had a story. Believe it or not, I still hear stories about her from Chester’s elders.” – *Peter Zanardi*

“**Marianne (Parodi) Heft** was born and raised in downtown Chester. After graduating from Valley Regional High School, she worked at Uarco, CJ Bates and Whelen Engineering. She and her husband Louis owned the General Store in the heart of Chester. Even with five children, she always has been active in the community. She was a Girl Scout leader, Boy Scout Committee Chair, 4-H Leader, member of Chester Historical Society, Chester Garden Club and Chester Land Trust as well as serving on her high school reunion committee and the St Joseph’s Church Christmas bazaar. A babysitter from her childhood, she loves children and assists in her daughter’s daycare, affectionately known as Memere. Her friendships are lasting, as is her dedication to her hometown of Chester.” – *Martin Heft*



## New Chester Films on Our YouTube Channel

Since COVID, we’ve been in the movie-making business – creating short films about Chester history for you to watch in your own home. Each is about 20 minutes or less, and each tells a story you probably did not know. For example:

- Do you know how Wig Hill Road got its name? Where was Wigwam Hollow?
- Did you know that Chester had active Abolitionists, one who helped start the country’s first incorporated all-black town (in Florida), which became the home of acclaimed author Zora Neale Hurston?
- How did Abraham Lincoln come to own a Silliman inkwell made in Chester?
- What drew Judge Constance Baker Motley to Chester?

These movies are presented by Chester historians – Donald Perreault, Marta Daniels and Tom Marshall – and filmed by Jon Claude Haines of Sea Robin Tech in Chester.

We also have a beautiful new tour of historical sites of Chester, filmed by Taylor Sahl of True Colors Productions and presented by Kailey Costa, a VRHS senior, for her Gold Award from Girl Scouts.

You can easily access the films through our website, [ChesterHistoricalSociety.org](http://ChesterHistoricalSociety.org).

# Society Plans Ahead to Preserve the Mill—Secure its Future

While COVID-19 disrupted our plans for public programs and exhibits, the Society was able to make significant progress on its 5-Year Strategic Plan. Adopted in November 2017, the plan covers the years 2018-2022 and coordinates the committees overseeing building and grounds, development and fundraising activities of the Society.

## Preserve the Mill—Secure its Future

During the past year, the Development Committee worked with the Building & Grounds Committee to develop a four-year fundraising campaign, “Preserve the Mill – Secure its Future,” to be launched in 2020. Due to COVID-19, however, this fundraising effort has been delayed. The trustees do not want to impose donation requests on the residents of Chester during this period of financial stress. Nevertheless, we were able to undertake some primary museum repairs and improvements, thanks to some prudent financial planning and a \$5000 grant (see below).

The “Preserve the Mill – Secure its Future” campaign identified nine essential infrastructure projects for implementation. During the last 15 months, four of these projects have been completed.

- Installing a Phase II HVAC system in a new code-compliant first floor utility room. This replaced an old system in the east-side attic
- Replacement of roof shingles
- Replacement of old gutters with leaf guard gutters and a new gutter system along south-side eave
- Creation of the replica spire by Art Christianson’s excellent craftsmanship. The spire was installed on the cupola by the roofing contractor.



Following the installation of the new roof shingles and gutters at the museum, member Art Christianson crafted a handsome spire to top the cupola, replacing the historic one that fell a few years ago.

The last three projects were benefited by a \$5000 grant from the 1772 Foundation in cooperation with Preservation Connecticut. We also replaced several courses of deteriorated clapboard along the deck side of the Mill. This new clapboard is now being protected from rain-water and ice damage by the south eave gutter system.

## Fundraising

On the fundraising side, the annual Creative Challenge silent auction and reception was postponed until 2021. The delay of these fundraising activities and unknown future pandemic impact cause concern and require close monitoring of financial obligations.

The one fundraiser we did offer was our “Light Up the Night” star sale, which began in late November. Chester resident Christopher Owens created prelighted wooden stars, which we sold to raise funds for the upgrade of exterior lighting at the museum. By the end of winter, we had sold 85 stars, raising a profit of \$3370. (Note: This star sale should NOT be confused with the “Stars for Hope” sale to raise funds for the Food Pantry during COVID-19. See page 3.)

## Development

Currently, CHS has two mutual funds, a balanced fund with stocks and bonds included, a preferred securities portfolio and a money market account. The Development Committee has focused on expanding the investment diversity of the two brokerage accounts. The goal is to expand and maintain conservative financial assets that will retain value and grow during these uncertain and volatile times.

A portion of these invested funds have been allocated to program, publication, educational and museum restoration expenses. Ongoing costs for maintaining the historic Mill and the grounds are an expensive obligation, requiring long-range planning and fiscal oversight efforts by the CHS trustees.

## A Note of Thanks

While CHS contracts for major projects, the contributions of volunteer time and energy from our Building & Grounds Committee, combined with members and others from the community, help keep our site clean and secure, while containing our costs. Thank you all!

# Chester Historical Society

Membership June 2019 - May 2020

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Samuel Chorches  
Will Clark\*  
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Robert Dona  
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Lauren Gister  
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Marie-Anne Parodi Heft  
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Paulette Heft  
Charley Hnilicka  
Jane Bance Homick\*  
Patricia Kosky  
Mitchell Koslawy  
Dorothy Lavezzoli  
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\*\*New Membership Level



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**Membership Form – Join with us in preserving and sharing Chester’s unique history**

Now 50 years old, Chester Historical Society is an independent, all-volunteer organization that is apart from the Chester Town Budget. We depend upon membership dues, an Annual Appeal, and grants to collect and preserve Chester rich history and find creative ways to share its story and its people with the community. To encourage participation, our museum and our public programs are all admission free.

In addition to supporting our mission, your membership includes: advance notice of events / activities; periodic e-newsletters; 10% museum store discount to purchase books, videos, postcards and historic maps.

- Special...** I am a new member – please extend my initial annual membership through June 2022.
- I wish to renew my annual membership through June 2021

Membership Level: Individual \$20 Household \$30 Benefactor \$100 Life \$500

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ St \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

email: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Note: Your email address is important as our primary source of informing our members of Society activities and events.  
 We do not share your info, including email address, with others.

Mail this form and a check to: Chester Historical Society, P.O. Box 204, Chester, CT 06412