



Chester Historical Society

Fall 2022 Newsletter

Tracing Carlos Silliman's Carpenter's Chest: A Donation Mystery

It's always fun when one historical topic links to another, then another, etc. Then again, we all have gone down rabbit holes, coming up empty at times.

The recent donation to our collection of Samuel Carlos Silliman's carpenter's chest took us on historical side trips as we attempted to trace its 200-year-old path to our door. Our journey touched on: (1) a master carver and his son; (2) the construction (and later relocating) of a historic Chester home; (3) Silliman inkwells; (4) a 19th century pillar of the community; (5) the local Catholic church; (6) a famous conceptual artist; and (7) a 20th century craftsman.

Middlesex Avenue resident Richard Sevigny, a Chester native, donated the chest, saying, "I thought it was time and the Chester Historical Society was just the right place." He remembers first seeing it in the early 1950s when his father Wilfred (Bill), a builder and craftsman by trade, was given it by Ray Bellows, Sr. who owned the Pratt House, then located opposite St. Joseph's Catholic Church on Middlesex Avenue.

The Pratt House, built in 1820 by Abram Mitchell for \$10,000, was designed by Samuel Belcher (who also designed two Old Lyme landmarks, The First Congregational Church and the Florence Griswold House).

Master carvers Deacon Samuel Silliman of Chester and Fenner Bush designed and carved its elaborate moldings, mantels and center stairway. Deacon Samuel's son, Samuel Carlos (usually called Carlos), was age 11 at that time.

Since Carlos entered a teenage apprenticeship with his father, we conjecture that Deacon Silliman made the small carpenter's chest for Carlos and elaborately penciled his son's name inside the lid. (We can still read the signature.)

By 1831 Deacon Silliman was in the manufacturing business and Carlos helped make lamp brackets, mallets and inkstands at the emerging business. Carlos was less active when his younger brothers Daniel and Joseph rose to become part owners of what became S. Silliman and Co., known for its inkstands and pocket inkwells.



Meanwhile, Carlos married Harriet L'Hommedieu in 1832 and in 1835 built a home for his family at nearby 4 East Liberty Street. Carlos committed himself to public service, serving as county commissioner, managing the prisons and reformatories, and serving in the State Legislature. He was one of seven Silliman men to be Chester First Selectman.

A biography of Samuel Carlos Silliman appeared in the 1884 Beers' edition, "The History of Middlesex County." Excerpts read:

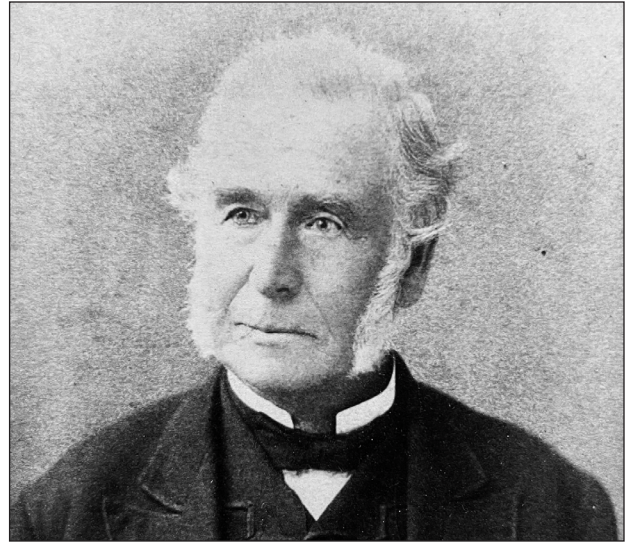
The snows of 74 winters have not whitened the hairs of Samuel C. Silliman, and yet he stands erect, strong in mind and body—like the sturdy oak of the forest, with a spotless escutcheon [reputation], and a public and private record of which any man might feel justly proud... From his early manhood up he has been identified with the public affairs of his native town, and while never seeking office, he has filled nearly every position of trust.

Carlos lived at 4 East Liberty Street until his death at age 86 in 1896; his Silliman descendants lived in the house well into the 20th century. Joel Severance and his family have owned this home near the Town Green since 1969.

(Continued on next page)



The 1820 Pratt House on Middlesex Avenue



Samuel Carlos Silliman 1809-1896

Let's return to the notable house that Deacon Samuel Silliman helped build on Middlesex Avenue. George Spencer bought the house in 1845 as a wedding present for his daughter and her husband, Dr. Ambrose Pratt. Pratt descendants lived there for 90 years and the house has since been known as the Pratt House.

In the mid-1930s, the Pratt House was bought by the Ray Bellows Sr. family. The Silliman carpenter's chest was given to Bill Seigny sometime before the house was sold to St. Joseph Catholic Church. Richard Seigny recalled that his father negotiated the sale of the house between the Bellows family and the Church in 1954.

After serving as the parish center until the new parish center opened in 1960, the Pratt House was sold in 1966 for \$1 to Louis Bertelli with the condition that he soon move the house at his expense (Bertelli also made a donation to the church). The house was slowly inched 900 feet uphill to its stately location at the west end of Pratt Street. In 1985 the property became the home of renowned artist Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) and his wife, Carol Androccio LeWitt.

Now, back to tracing Carlos Silliman's carpenter's chest. We have a good sense about how and when it was created. Deacon Silliman probably made the chest for his son in the 1820s. The big unknown is why was it in the Pratt House when the Bellows family lived there in the early 1950s, 130 years after the chest was made? How long had it been there?

Is it possible Carlos left it in the house after he worked there with his father in the 1820s? Or did Carlos and his descendants hold it and later pass it on? If so, how did the Bellows family come to own it?

We are reminded that rabbit holes are not predictable and can lead to unknowns.

What we are sure of is that for the last 70 years the Samuel C. Silliman carpenter's chest was with the Seigny family, first father, then son. We are extremely grateful that Richard Seigny chose to donate it to the Society, enabling us to showcase it with our Silliman display and share it with visitors to Chester Museum at The Mill.

Note: The Pratt House was the first Chester house to be accepted for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and the Historic American Buildings Survey. It was also one of the many stops on the repeating trail of the legendary Leatherman, a short reclusive man clothed in leather who walked the same route through eastern New York State and central Connecticut in the late 1880s. Often sleeping in caves (never homes), his predictable round trip covered 365 miles over 34-36 days. Dr. Pratt was known to have treated the Leatherman on occasion, especially on his last trips.

In Appreciation: I'd like to thank Richard Seigny, Frances Bertelli, Joel Severance and Hank Bellows for their contributions in verifying and adding to the story of this 200-year-old artifact.

Skip Hubbard

Fall Events – Something for Everyone, Mark Your Calendars

Tales from the Kitchen

Sunday, Sept. 25, 4 p.m., Chester Meeting House

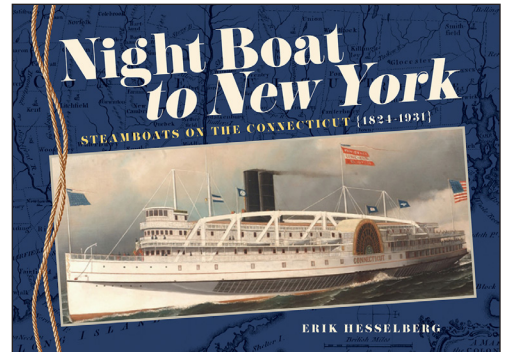
Our restaurant exhibit, “Where We Ate; Where We Eat,” has sparked our curiosity for “kitchen tales” from past restaurant owners/chefs/creators. Join us at the Meeting House for our conversation with Priscilla Martel and Charles Van Over (Restaurant du Village); Gerry Beaumier (Wheatmarket); Jon Joslow (Chart House and Inn at Chester); and Charlene Janecek (Lunch Box, shown here with husband, Bill). Free. Refreshments offered.



CT River Steamboats

Sunday, Oct. 2, 4 p.m. Chester Meeting House

Erik Hesselberg will discuss his newly published book, *Night Boat to New York: Steamboats on the Connecticut, 1815-1931*, while displaying historical images through PowerPoint. Erik has been writing about the Connecticut River for over 20 years, which makes him a fascinating lecturer on the river’s place in the American experience. For this lecture, he will feature Chester/Deep River connections, such as the ivory trade and steamboat Captain William Hills of Chester. We are teaming up with Deep River Historical Society to bring you this program. Free. Refreshments offered.



LeWitt House, Studio & Sculpture Gardens

Saturday, Oct. 8, 2-4 p.m. – Private Tour

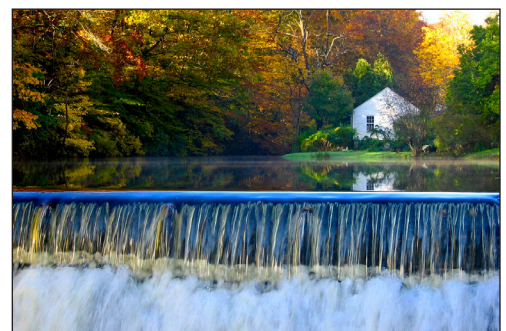
Join us for a private tour hosted by Carol LeWitt of the home, studio (pictured) and sculpture garden of Chester resident and internationally renowned conceptual artist and creative pioneer, Sol LeWitt. The house, known as the Pratt House, a Connecticut Federal period architectural gem and the first Chester house to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, abounds with contemporary art by the LeWitt family. Only a limited number of tickets are still available. Email us now at chestercthistoricalsociety@gmail.com to reserve yours. Ticket \$30 (\$25 for CHS members).



“Chester Dams: Treasures or Trouble?”

Sunday, Oct. 16, 4 p.m. Chester Meeting House

The Chester Historical Society is collaborating with the Chester Land Trust and the Chester Conservation Commission to present a panel discussion by experts on this important and interesting topic. Our town has about 30 dams, most of which are privately owned. The speakers will explore the many different aspects relating to dams in our state, such as historical importance, dam inspection and repair, owner responsibility, natural resource concerns, emergency management, and restoring or removing dams. Free. Refreshments offered.



Robbie Collomore "All in the Fall" Concert Series

Sundays at 5 p.m. in Chester Meeting House

Tickets: collomoreconcerts.org

Sept. 18: Sterling Elliott, Cello & Yi-Nuo Wang, Piano - Classical

Oct. 9: Emmet Cohen Trio - Jazz Piano

Nov. 6: Noree Chamber Soloists - Classical

Nov. 20: Stephane Wrembel Band - Gypsy Jazz



Recent Donations to the Collection and Some Stories Behind Them

We continue to be thankful for donations to the Society's growing collection and archives. The donations and loans take a variety of forms: small and large, objects, letters, photos, postcards, certificates, diaries, etc. For flat items, we can scan and return the original if you choose. The museum was designed with two storage areas; both are temperature / humidity controlled and have a dry fire suppression system. Contact Curator Diane Lindsay (860-526-2443) to discuss your possible donation or loan. You can learn more by viewing our new film, "Show & Tell; Building the Chester Collection," which can be found on our YouTube page on our website, chesterhistoricalsociety.org. Below are a few recent donations.



WWI postcards – loaned by Msgr. James Carini

John Carini, the donor's father, was deployed in Europe during WWI. During his service time he corresponded with postcards to Katie Scallia, his girlfriend from Chester. His postcard from Luxembourg on 11/29/1918 reads, "Dear Katie, Just a few lines to let you know I'm OK and hope the same of you. We will soon be at the Rhine. A Merry Christmas to all, John."

His words must have worked as the two were married upon his return. Monsignor Carini loaned us the postcards to scan. He also donated his father's service medals and a handheld stereoscope.

Where the Babes Make the Bucks pin – donated by Leslie Strauss

In 2002 there came a huge revelation for Chester Village. The 2000 state census disclosed that the women in Chester earned more than the men. This was cause for celebration, at least for the women.

Spearheaded by Catherine Conant's clever slogan "Chester, CT Where the Babes Make the Bucks," Jan Good designed pins and posters and women business owners and workers throughout the town flaunted this unique statewide achievement.

The Hartford Courant summed it up perfectly in a July 2002 article that focused on a celebratory dinner party with over 40 Chester women at the Blue Oar: *A male diner at one of the few remaining tables bravely asked what all the hoopla was about. He shook his head in amazement and announced that he'd "never witnessed an event with so much estrogen before."*

"As a real estate business owner in Chester, I was a proud attendee of the 2002 celebration," said Leslie. "The pin represents an unusual and exciting event in Chester's history, a surprising finding that led to tremendous pride, sisterhood and fun. It's one for the Chester history books!"



Vintage New Era photos – donated by Nancy Johnson James

This summer we were surprised by a visit from Nancy Johnson James and her daughter, Lori Nadeau, from Conestoga, N.Y. They brought with them an envelope stuffed with wonderful house photos of Chester and Essex, taken by Nancy's grandfather Charles Perkins when he worked for the "New Era" in 1894-1900 (plus an extra photo taken in 1918).

Charles, who lived in Essex, married Emma Leet, of Chester, in 1898. They had one child, Dorothy, who became Nancy's mother. The Leet homestead on Straits Road (later owned by Bob Blair Sr.), was always special to Dorothy and Nancy, and now to Nancy and her daughter, Lori, who make an annual trip to this area to visit their family's gravestones and their old family home.

They told us they'd always treasured the old photos taken by Charles Perkins but knew they would mean a lot more to our Historical Society and Essex.

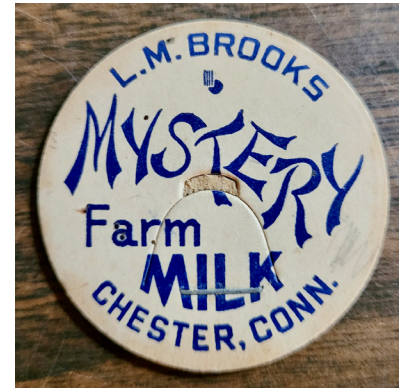


Pictured: Colt House in 1918; West Chester School (pre-1900)

Cardboard milk bottle caps – donated by Dama Demanche

“I don’t remember where I got the caps,” recalled Dama. “I used to work at Saybrook Recycled Furniture so I think probably there, but I knew I would lose them or destroy them... they were too neat for that...a small bit of ephemera.”

When we saw ‘L.M. Brooks’ written on the cap, it made sense to contact two society members, David Brooks in Chester and Barbara Brooks Fraser in Florida. Both quickly confirmed that their grandfather, Louis Brooks, owned Mystery Farm, a dairy farm in Hope Valley, RI. At times, Louis also kept a few animals in back of his Liberty Street home near the Meeting House.



In the late 1930s, the sterilization of bottles and refrigerators replacing iceboxes made milk safer. By 1941 annual consumption peaked at 744 glasses per person. “A bottle of milk is a bottle of health” was a popular tagline. Leaving empty bottles for the milkman was an early exposure to the concept of recycling.

United Church choir photo – donated by John Trabucchi

While a Chester High School senior (class of '47), John Trabucchi’s talented sister Joan was the music director of the high school as well as choir director and organist at the United Church of Chester. She is pictured at the lower far left. The photo appears to be from 1949 at the time the former Congregational and Baptist Churches were joined to form the current United Church of Chester. Joan wed Jesse Lanzi and later married Tom Ziemba, owner of the Chester Airport, and worked at the airport for many years. John’s donations also included a 1917 Chester Fair Book and Florence Berg’s autograph album.



Signed Copy “Grandma Called it Carnal” – donated by Sosse Baker

Many years ago the Historical Society presented a one-woman play with Madeleine Winans about the “Grandma” in this book. Sosse said, “I was fascinated by the story. Fortunately, the library had a copy. The author wrote about visiting her grandma in our town in a house I visited many times. It was a town of footpaths back then in the ‘40s, no doubt going back much earlier.

“I decided to go on eBay to see if I could buy a copy of the book. There were several available, but I chose one because it was a signed second edition (it cost just \$4). Much to my surprise, when it arrived, it was a treasure trove. Inside was a pamphlet published by Reader’s Digest about the book and a few letters from the author, Bertha Damon, to a dear friend, I assume the owner of the book. My favorite note was on stationery that had a wonderful illustration of Bertha’s garden in New Hampshire. It belongs in the archives. I was happy to pass all of it on to the Society.”

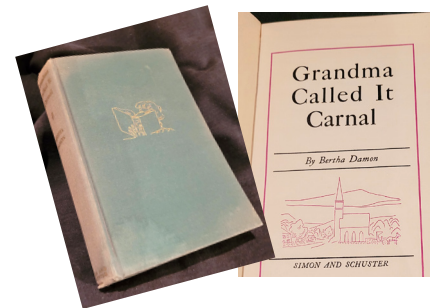
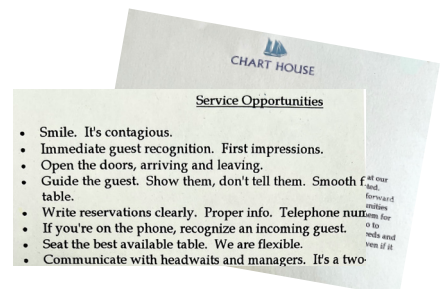


Chart House “Service Opportunities” – donated by Jane Gordon

Many younger residents worked at the popular Chart House restaurant after it opened in 1972. From 1988 to 1994 and later from 2011 to 2014 Jane Gordon worked the reception desk in Hawaiian attire. “I was quite cold in the winter every time that outside door opened,” she reflected. Jane donated the company’s list of ‘Service Opportunities’ (e.g. Smile, it’s contagious; Seat the best table available, we are flexible; Teamwork with the bus staff, keep those seats hot), which were reinforced at periodic employee meetings. You can read them at the museum’s “Where We Ate; Where We Eat” exhibit, which runs through October. Jane also donated some Susan Bates knitting implements.



Publications in the Works: Streams, Mills, Dams & Old Houses

Nate Jacobson, a Chester native, retired civil engineer and 1972 founder of Nathan L. Jacobson & Associates in Chester, has written a new book to be published late this fall by the Society.

Titled **“The Streams, Mill Dams and Mills of Chester,”** it is – in Nate’s words – “The story of how a small New England town came to be and how its early years were greatly influenced by the several streams that flowed through it and the numerous dams and water-powered mills that were built along them.”



Nate’s knowledge of our streams, mills and dams has been invaluable to the Society over the years. He wrote the book, **“The Waterhouse Grist Mill Saga”** that we published in 2017.

He helped us explore the history of the millstones that now reside in front of the Museum. And he painstakingly crafted the model of that grist mill, which has a permanent place in our **“Streams of Change: Life & Industry along the Pattaconk”** exhibit.



Deep Hollow Reservoir Dam



Do You Own an Old House?

Many of you may be familiar with "The Houses & History of Chester" book (above), which we published in 1984. The book contained nearly 180 brief bios of residential and non-residential buildings built by 1875.

It’s time to begin work on an updated edition, one that now includes houses built up to 1900. It’s a large project, but one well worth the effort.

If you own an 18th or 19th century house, we need to hear from you – even if your house was in the last edition.

With your initial help, all eligible homes will be included. This next edition will have a new format, likely with space for additional information and photos about each house.

Unlike the last edition, the current homeowners’ names will not be listed.

Our immediate need is to have a list of homeowners and their email addresses so we can easily contact owners for more information about their house.

To start the process, please email us soon at chestercthistoricalsociety@gmail.com with your name and the street address of your house. If you have any questions, call Cary Hull at 860-558-4701.

Funding for the mailing of this newsletter provided by Essex Savings Bank and Essex Financial Services as part of their Community Investment Program.



Have You Been Yet?

The visitor activity at Chester Museum at The Mill has been very positive, a return to the levels of pre-Covid exhibits. For instance, a recent Sunday had a sequence of visitors from Chester; West Bloomfield, MI; Montgomery, TX; Deep River; Quebec, CAN; Springfield, MA; Middletown; Madison; Durham and Columbia, CT.

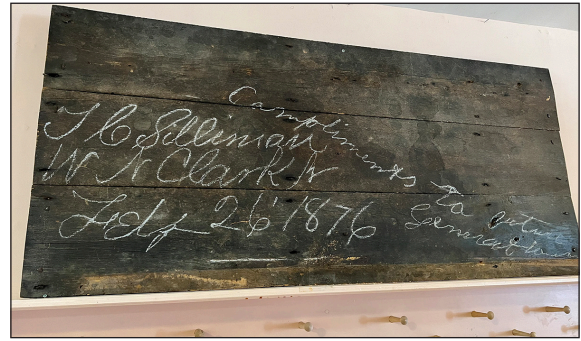
Have you visited yet this summer?

Our seasonal exhibit, **“Where We Ate; Where We Eat,”** has been fun for Chester visitors but has special appeal for our residents.

In fact, we’ve received a variety of restaurant memorabilia since we opened in June, such as a recent gift of a Cozy Castle menu by Annie Burton. Do you remember being able to buy a large pizza for \$6.55?

The museum will continue to be open Saturdays from 1 to 4 pm and Sundays from 10 am to 4 pm. It will close on the last weekend in October. We encourage everyone to swing by soon.

Also, continuing our Thanksgiving tradition, we will open the museum for the two days following the holiday. The museum will be open 1-4 pm. on Friday, November 25th and Saturday, November 26th to allow families and visitors a relaxing alternative to shopping and eating.



During the 2020 installation of the new Meeting House floor, a message from the past was revealed as its 1876 flooring was removed and its previous 1793 oak floor was exposed. The chalk signatures of Thomas Cook Silliman and William N. Clark, Jr. were evident along with their message going forward: ‘compliments to future generations.’

Silliman, son of Deacon Samuel Silliman, and Clark, brother-in-law of Merritt Brooks, organized the renovations with Stephen Shortland. Art Christianson restored the signed boards which are now mounted in the Meeting House.

The 1876 renovation was when the building design was changed from a New England meetinghouse to a more Victorian design auditorium. The front of the structure became the back, the stage was added, the gallery extended and reversed (front to back), and a new floor added. By 2020, after 154 years of use, that floor probably had earned its ‘squeak’.

Society Summer Program was a Historical Hit



“I always wanted to make a basket”

“Making the bread and butter was the best; then tasting it”

“Why would I change a single thing; this program was perfect”

Move over ‘Hamilton’. From the children’s reviews, there was another historical hit program opening in Chester this summer. Created by Rob Miceli and sister Nancy Miceli Watkins, together with Donna Carlson, Deb Calamari, Cheri Ferrari Habersang, Art Christianson and Sosse Baker, the Society invited elementary-aged children for four Friday sessions, each with a different focus. Each session was free with a combination of local history and hands-on activity. The activities included weaving a basket, breadmaking, creating personal quilts, making storybooks, building birdhouses and painting model facades of historical Chester buildings. Among other areas, the programs included exposure to architecture, recycling and assembly-line manufacturing.



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

Now 52 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 2024.
- I wish to renew my annual membership through June 2023

Membership Level: Individual \$20 Household \$30 Benefactor \$100 Life \$1,000

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