



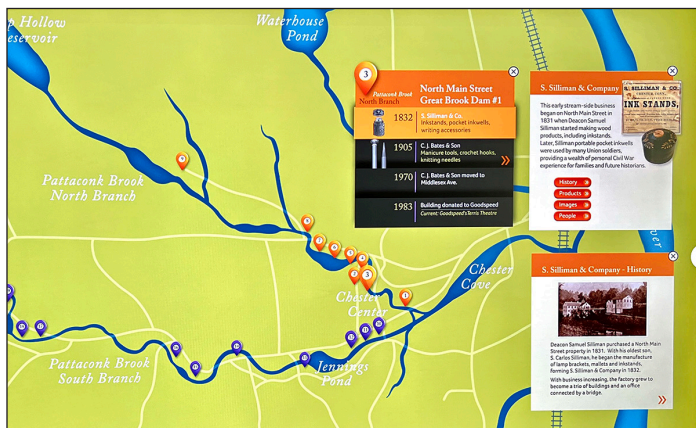
# Chester Historical Society

August 2023 Newsletter

## Touch, Explore & Discover Chester History

How neat would it be to simply touch a map and learn about the Chester industries that once lined the banks of the Pattaconk Brook?

Once only our dream, it's now a reality at Chester Museum at The Mill. Visitors can now step up to a colorful, large 86" touchscreen and explore mill sites and industries that used waterpower to manufacture a surprisingly diverse array of products during the early years of our town.



Titled "The Pattaconk & Its Mills," the exhibit features timelines referencing 80 industries that operated at 20 mill sites. Links to the history and products of three major industries are in place now, with many more to be added in the weeks to come.

The dream was realized thanks to a generous donation to honor Chester native Nate Jacobson when the Main Street company he founded, Nathan L. Jacobson and Associates, celebrated its 50th anniversary last fall.

We invite visitors of all ages to enjoy the Touch, Explore & Discover experience of "The Pattaconk & Its Mills" ... and with more content on the way, there is reason to visit again and again.

Chester Museum at The Mill is admission free and air-conditioned with two floors of exhibits.

Hours: Saturdays 1-4 pm and Sundays 10 am-4 pm.  
Group tours by appointment.

## In the Woods

The influence of Chester's earliest Italian immigrant families remains part of Chester's social existence. Hard to believe, much of it started "in the woods." (See Page 3)

Geraldine Carini-Garcia believes the man in the middle holding the saw was her grandfather Francisco Carini, one of Chester's first Italian immigrants.



# Free for All



As many are aware, there is no admission fee to visit Chester Museum at The Mill. But that was not the policy when we opened in 2010, when only Historical Society members could visit for free.

Our thinking began to change in late 2011 after attending a national convention of historical organizations. A paper titled “Breaking Free: Museum Admissions and New Audiences” was presented at a workshop we attended. Some history organizations that were valuing more public programming and education and becoming less curatorial had begun lowering the cost of admission or becoming admission-free.

We were immediately receptive. Our long history of public programs and recent opening of the museum clearly pointed to fully joining this emerging trend.

Other than purchasing the building in 2001, our next best decision may have been eliminating admission fees that third season. Annual attendance soared, from about 250 to 700-800 (it now is 1,000+). The optional donation box revenue easily surpassed our earlier fees.

Most importantly, the new policy supported our community-based mission, sharing Chester history with residents and visitors to Chester.

Locals could visit often, bringing friends and family. Fresh exhibits were created annually for our first-floor area. Portable exhibit panels now appear in public places. Our on-site educational programs have expanded as well.

In sum, other than selected fundraising events, our free admission policy applies to all our offerings: museum visits, public programs, visitor groups, on-line videos, off-site exhibits, etc.

We invite the community to our door.

## Did You Know?

**When developing content for the new touchscreen exhibit, we've been constantly reminded of our town's unique history.**

- Like Essex and Clinton, Chester was a major hub for distilling Witch Hazel, beginning around 1878.
- On West Main Street, just past Wig Hill Road, there was a “tenement house” for workers in the nearby textile mills. Called “The Long House,” it provided housing for ten families until it burned down in 1907.
- Between 1808 and 1951, patents were awarded to 62 Pattaconk Brook mill owners and workers for a variety of tools and household implements. These included an insect trap, gun brush, single twist auger, broom holder, nail buffer, garment hanger and gimlet screw cutter.
- The building now used as Chester Museum was home to the Tony Award-winning National Theatre of the Deaf in the 1980s and '90s. It drew many famous actors, including Oscar Award-winning actor Troy Kotsur.
- One of the industries made hammock frames in three sizes – for adults and infants as well as toy hammocks. Another made woven wire beds (one ad claimed there was “no chance for vermin” with them).
- Perhaps the most lasting Chester history is associated with S. Silliman Co. and its portable pocket inkwell. Patented shortly before the Civil War, the inkwell was used by soldiers during breaks from marches and battles. Rather than just letters from home, two-way communication accelerated. Soldiers shared their emotions and the loneliness of war with loved ones back home. These letters from the field have become a rich resource for historians to this day.

## In and Out of the Woods

In November 1975, Rose Carini spoke at a Historical Society program on the challenges of Chester's earliest Italian immigrants.

She spoke of "families huddled together in Little Italy [Deep Hollow]," of the "makeshift cabins they built," and of the men "making hand-hewn railroad ties for the railroads."

Rose, born in Chester in May 1894 to Francisco and Dominica Carini, told of the loneliness of the women resulting from the long hours their husbands worked and of their own grueling labors, not the least of which was lugging water in buckets from the stream during harsh New England winters.

And she recalled her parents' stories regarding the all-important first step in assimilation. "The men learned English when they walked from Higganum where they worked in the woods to shops in Middletown. They would hold up their pay envelopes to prove they had money to pay and peruse the aisles of the stores with the shopkeepers, pointing to articles they wanted to buy. The shop owners would repeat the names of the products."

Francisco Carini along with relatives Carlo and Constantine were "in the woods" then, as were Vincenzo Ferrari, Antonio Zanardi and Nicola Scaglia. You could find a Monte, a Castelli, a Zanelli out there as well. Following the turn of the century, Emelio Bertelli, Tony Zanardi, Martin Lanzi, Peter Lavezzoli and Pietro Malchiodi spent time "in the woods."

The 1902 *Hartford Courant*, under the headline "WOODCHOPPERS STRIKE," reported "The Italian wood choppers in this section had an increase a few weeks ago of 50 per cent in the pay for cutting cord wood, making it \$1.35 a cord. They are now on strike for 15 cents a cord more." And why not: There was still a demand, the paper pointing out "the wood dealers have more orders than they can fill in months and have advanced the price to \$5 cord in four foot lengths..."



*Francisco and Dominica Carini and their family in this early 1900s photo. Rose Carini (center) was their oldest child and only daughter.*

The Italians were showing some strength. There were, in the 1900 census, 15 Italian-born heads of household in Chester. Eleven were homeowners, most with mortgages likely held by either the Chester Trust Company or Chester Building and Loan (both controlled by Chester's established hierarchy), another step in assimilation.

When the demand for railroad ties and cord wood slacked, Italians went into the factories (all three Carinis found factory jobs as did Nicola Scaglia and Tony Zanardi) or became private contractors (Vincent Ferrari, Martin Lanzi, Peter Lavezzoli were masons).

In 1914 the Connecticut Bible Society identified 57 Italian families (345 people) in Chester, far ahead of second-place Germany (27), as far as "nationalities" go and second only to "Americans" (312) on the list.

The Italians now had their own hierarchy. In 1910 Vincent Ferrari and his three sons-in-law – John Germini, George Zanelli and Peter Montana – formed two-thirds of the incorporators for the Italian-American Society. Columbo and Charles Castelli made up the other third.

And the woods? Italians now owned some of it. In 1909 Vincent Ferrari made 150 acres available to the town's Fish and Game Club.

— Peter Zanardi



## The Collection Grows - Recent Additions

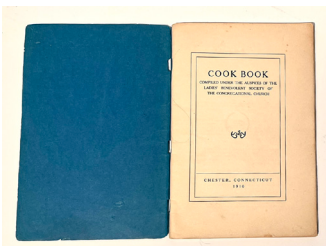
It's always interesting; you never know what's coming next to our doorstep. Here are a few of the latest donations. If you're thinking of donating an item or artifact, the place to start is with our Curator, Diane Lindsay. She can be reached by email ([dianedavelindsay@att.net](mailto:dianedavelindsay@att.net)) or by phone (860) 526-2443.



**Native American Hoe** Donated by Bill Myers, who was given it by Richard Harrell. Dick, who owned 27 Maple St. at the time, found it deep in the soil in his backyard.

Dr. John Pfeiffer, archaeologist and anthropologist, said, "This item is probably a hoe. Appears that the base where the tool was hafted is broken and missing. It is Native American, used when there was an agriculture (corn, beans, squash) base to their subsistence after 1000 AD, more or less."

**Chester Military Band uniform hat**, worn by Victor Carini and donated by his grandnephew Tom Doak. The band was formed in 1905 by Frederick Silliman. Quoting from *Kate Silliman's Chester Scrapbook*, "Many of the men and boys who joined this band were taught to play their chosen instrument by Mr. Silliman. Within a short time they had become sufficiently proficient to be able to give concerts and entertainments to raise funds for uniforms. By the time the dark blue uniforms, ornamented with gilt buttons, were purchased, the band was much in demand in Chester and surrounding towns. A wooden bandstand was built at the foot of Main Street, and there on summer evenings the townspeople gathered to listen to the band play."



**1910 "Cook Book"** compiled under the auspices of the Ladies' Benevolent Society of the Congregational Church." Among the many recipes in this 56-page cookbook are ones for "Scalloped Mutton," "Shrimp Wiggle," "Creamed Eggs," "Blackberry Flummery" and "Chocolate Junket."

The recipes were given by local women (e.g., "Mrs. C. J. Bates" and "Mrs. E. B. Lynde"). Donated by the Bertelli family.

**Photo of Jennings Factory workers**, probably turn of the century. Edward W. Clark (1875-1956) was the first man on the right. Edward worked at Jennings only as a young man. He later became a clock repairer and jewelry store owner.

Donated by Helene Ferrari, granddaughter of Edward Clark.



**“Dunham’s 1928 Southern Connecticut Valley and Shore Line Directory** Containing an Alphabetical List of Inhabitants and Business Firms, Streets, Etc.” Chester is just one of the towns included in this 612-page directory. Each person’s listing gives address, employment, and wife’s name (if applicable); for example,

“Benedetto Domenic (Mary) lab h Middlesex ave.”

Translation: Domenic Benedetto (wife Mary) was a “laborer” with a house on Middlesex Avenue. Also, his listing is preceded by two symbols, denoting he owned a car and owned real estate. Now nearly 100 years old, the directory was donated by the Bertelli family.



**This 14-inch bit brace** was made in Chester by the Russell Jennings Co. and was recently donated to the Society by Jim Zanardi. While an auger has a bit (drill) permanently attached to a handle, the chuck at the working end of a hand brace allowed bits to be interchanged for multiple needs. The U-shaped handle creates additional torque, enabling the tool to drill wider and deeper holes than can a geared hand-powered drill. It is also known as a Carpenter’s Brace.

George Ott’s **Chester High School varsity letters and 1948 graduation tassel** were donated by Julie Nash, George’s granddaughter. Unlike current varsity letter awards, these generic cloth letters do not indicate specific sports. However, Nate Jacobson, a longtime childhood friend, recalled that George was active in baseball and, possibly, track.

By 1948, Chester High School was in its final years. Soon students from Chester joined classmates from Deep River and Essex to form the first graduation class at Valley Regional High School in 1951. The Chester Hose Co. firehouse now occupies the site of the former high school.



**Lumber Tag** from the former Chester Lumber Company. The cloth tag (“You’re Following the Leader”) was attached to products longer than vehicles when leaving the store. Thanks to Bill Myers, who acquired this tag from Rob Larson.

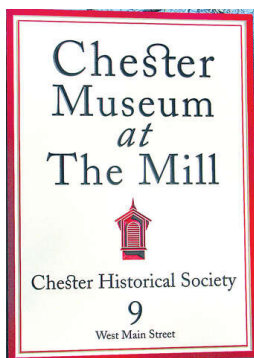
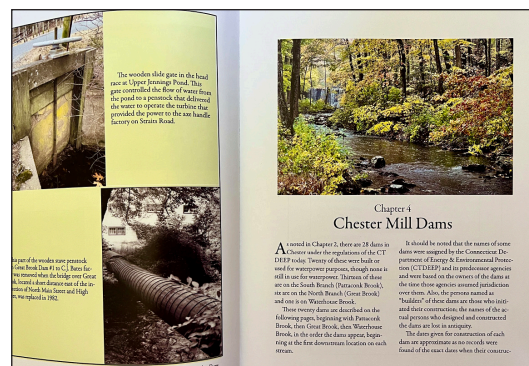
Chester Lumber Company began at 80 West Main Street, and then was moved in the 1950s-60s to Middlesex Avenue where the small shopping center is today.

The owners were the Plattenbergs, and then their daughter, Joan, and her husband Charlie Castelli. Many homes built in those years were made of Chester Lumber materials.

# Our Most Recent Publication

Nate Jacobson's latest book, "The Streams, Mill Dams and Mills of Chester," was launched with a book signing on June 30 and became an immediate hit. The colorful 118-page book balances Nate's research with 116 maps, illustrations and photos (historic and current), while taking the reader down the waterways that powered early Chester industries.

Copies are \$30 (\$25 for Society members) and are available at Chester Museum at The Mill.



## In Appreciation

The recent passing of Peter Good made us think of all the enduring designs he and his wife Jan created in town and especially those over the last 50 years for the Chester Historical Society. The Goods were supportive from our very beginning in 1970. From early books, posters and maps to fundraising events, to the very signage that attracts and greets residents and visitors to Chester Museum at The Mill. When driving in or out of town, take notice of the large sign, clean yet with a distinctive historical twist, on Rte. 148 at our entrance. It's Good, darn Good... Thank you Jan and Peter, again and again.

You can help preserve  
and share Chester's story.  
Become a member today!



Chester Museum at The Mill  
Chester Historical Society

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

Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/St/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Level: **Please circle.** Individual (\$20) Household (\$35) Benefactor (\$100) Sponsor (\$250) Life (\$1,000)

All dues are annual with the exception of Life. Current Membership year ends June 30, 2024.

**Bonus - New memberships extended for 2 years, through June 30, 2025.**

Make check to Chester Historical Society. Mail this form to Chester Historical Society, P.O. Box 204, Chester, CT 06412  
Alternatively, go to [chesterhistoricalsociety.org](http://chesterhistoricalsociety.org) website to join online or print a membership form.



# CT Freedom Trail Celebration – Sept. 23

The Constance Baker Motley Preserve heritage site in Chester will be honored on Saturday, September 23rd, 1-4 pm, when its popular Little Rock Nine Hiking Trail and newly installed storyboard will be dedicated. The occasion, co-sponsored by the Chester Land Trust and Chester Historical Society, is part of a month-long, state-wide celebration of Connecticut's 28-year-old Freedom Trail.

Through a legislative act of the Connecticut General Assembly in 1995, the Amistad Committee, Inc. with the Connecticut Historical Commission, established the Freedom Trail. It documents and designates sites in Connecticut that embody the struggle for freedom and human dignity, celebrates the accomplishments of the state's African American community, and promotes heritage tourism.



The Trail now has 170 sites across 50 municipalities, including Chester. Sites include buildings used on the Underground Railroad; those associated with the 1839 Amistad case; and gravestones, monuments and other structures that exemplify African American struggles for justice and equality. Chester's Motley site is the first to represent African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement.

New Haven-born Constance Baker Motley (1921-2005) was a trail-blazing civil rights attorney with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund who helped litigate every major battle of the Civil Rights era from Rosa Parks' Memphis Bus Boycott, Dr. King's Birmingham Children's Crusade, John Lewis' Freedom Rides and SNCC's lunch counter sit-ins.

Motley, however, was best known for her school desegregation victories, where she led the fight

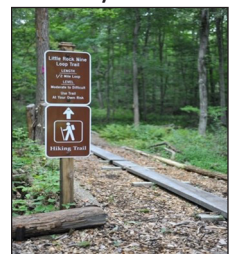
to enforce Brown v. Board of Education outlawing segregated schools. Litigating cases (including 10 at Supreme Court), she successfully dismantled Jim Crow at hundreds of state schools—from universities in Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and South Carolina, to her groundbreaking Arkansas high school desegregation case, the "Little Rock Nine." Her brilliance earned her the reputation as "chief tactician of the Civil Rights Movement."

In 1966, Motley became the first African American female appointed to a federal judgeship. Her rulings in American jurisprudence expanded justice, equal access and equality for women, workers and minorities. During this period (1965-2005), she maintained her 40-year seasonal residence in Chester, with husband Joel, and their son Joel III.

After her death in 2005, Motley's Chester home on Cedar Lake Road was sold privately. The remaining land was purchased by the Chester Land Trust in 2016, developed as a public Preserve, and dedicated in 2017. Both the Preserve and former home were designated as one heritage site, and in 2018 placed on the CT Freedom Trail. In 2020, the Land Trust created a walking trail on the Preserve and named it for Motley's famous "Little Rock Nine" (LRN) case; the Historical Society wrote the text for its storyboard. Both trail and storyboard will be dedicated September 23rd.

The "Little Rock Nine" nickname describes the nine teenagers who courageously confronted the violent and massive white resistance against their entry into all-white Central High in 1957. Motley and the Legal Defense Fund led the successful admission of these students; their case was the first to gain national attention. The LRN hiking trail on the Motley Preserve honors and memorializes this historic struggle.

— Marta Daniels



**Everyone Invited to Celebrate - Saturday, Sept. 23, 1-4 pm**

Motley Preserve, 100 Cedar Lake Road, Chester - Parking at Motley field  
Light refreshments, hiking, and house tours

**Learn about Motley's Chester History** [www.chesterhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.chesterhistoricalsociety.org)  
**Learn about Motley Preserve and Little Rock Nine Hiking Trail** [www.chesterlandtrust.org](http://www.chesterlandtrust.org)



**Chester Historical Society**  
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## Mark Your Calendar

**Friday – Sunday, August 25-27**

**Chester Fair**

Historical Society Exhibit  
Chester Fairgrounds

**Sunday, September 17**

**Robbie Collomore Concert Series**

Lun Li (Violin), Albert Cano Smit (Piano)  
Chester Meetinghouse, 5 p.m.

**Saturday, September 23**

**Freedom Trail Celebration** (see page 7)

Motley Preserve, 1-4 pm

**Sunday, September 24**

**Robbie Collomore Concert Series**

Frank Vignola & Tessa Lark – Jazz Duo  
Chester Meetinghouse, 5 p.m.

**Sunday, October 1**

**40th Anniversary – Chester Sewer Parade**

Illustrated Presentation  
Chester Meetinghouse, 5 p.m.

**Sunday, October 29**

**Museum Season Closes**

(See also Nov 24-25)  
Chester Museum at The Mill

**Sunday, October 29**

**Robbie Collomore Concert Series**

Jason Vieaux – Classical Guitar  
Chester Meetinghouse, 5 p.m.

**Sunday, November 19**

**Robbie Collomore Concert Series**

Alsarah & Nubatones – World Music  
Chester Meetinghouse, 5 p.m.

**Friday / Saturday, November 24-25**

**Family Thanksgiving Hours**

Chester Museum at The Mill

## Stay Informed

[www.chesterhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.chesterhistoricalsociety.org)  
[www.collomoreconcerts.org](http://www.collomoreconcerts.org)

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