



MANSFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Vol. 53, No. 3

November 2017

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Greetings and hello, my name is David Landry, and as you may have learned from the September newsletter I am taking over the position of President from Keith Wilson. Keith has been an outstanding President for the past five years, and I hope the transition will be a smooth one as I quickly learn on the job with Keith's and my fellow board members' help. If you happened to see the Boy Scout exhibit this season, then you can appreciate the time, energy, and passion that Keith (along with his co-exhibitor Louanne Cooley) put into crafting such an engaging exhibit that touched many people both young and old. Keith also spearheaded the redesign of our office area in 2012 and led us through some challenging times as we renegotiated our lease with the town, successfully applied for a Historic Preservation Technical Assistance Grant, and prepared for the condition assessment of our buildings. His dedication to the Historical Society will be missed, and I have some pretty big shoes to fill.

I would also like to welcome our new board members, Assistant Treasurer, Scott Dunstan and Members-At-Large, Laura Crow and Mia Mitoma. Also thanks to Donna Clouette who graciously stepped up to the Vice President position after many years on the board as chair of the Old Houses Committee which she will continue to also serve on as well.

On November 17th Dr. James Golden, Director of Education at the Mark Twain House & Museum, will speak about Mark Twain in Connecticut. We hope you can attend this exceptional program; please see more details inside this newsletter.

Like a lot of the members of the Society and residents of the town of Mansfield, I am a transplant. I relocated to Connecticut in 2002 with my family to take advantage of the great schools and rural character that we all call The Quiet Corner. We are lucky to have such a great mix of old New England pastoral charm and access to modern amenities that only a college town can offer. Inevitably, some of that charm can get left in the dust as modern life marches on.

Take for instance the old general store in Mansfield Center. Unless you missed the big yellow banner out in front of the building, it may be hard to see that the connections to our past are in need of some help. Please read the article later in this newsletter regarding the Mansfield Center General Store and the condition of its porches. Even the historic town hall and the former town office building that our Society currently occupies have experienced some deferred maintenance issues.

(Continued next page)

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Friday, November 17, 7:30 p.m.: NOVEMBER MEETING & PROGRAM

Dr. James Golden, Director of Education at the Mark Twain House & Museum, will present an illustrated talk, "Mark Twain in Connecticut." This event will be held at the Buchanan Auditorium at the Mansfield Public Library, (54 Warrentown Road [Route 89], Mansfield Center 06250).

(President's column continued):

Hopefully our efforts to find grant money and creative ways to partner with the town will move us in a positive direction preserving these former municipal buildings. Historically the grit, determination, and cooperation of neighbors helped forge the community we now enjoy today and we should keep that in mind as we work to reach solutions to these problems.

Your membership in the Society is a great start to becoming more educated about the past and how historical literacy can shape our decisions and our critical thinking about the present and the future. But there is more to do. If you have a special skill, please consider becoming more involved on one of our committees or joining our board. The Mansfield Historical Society will undoubtedly face new challenges and exciting opportunities in the coming years. I look forward to working with you to extend and strengthen the role MHS will play in the continued prosperity of Mansfield and in the preservation of its history.

David Landry, President

MARK TWAIN PROGRAM AND SILK REELING DEMONSTRATION ON NOV. 17

We have two exciting events planned for our November meeting. We are pleased to welcome Dr. James Golden, Director of Education at the Mark Twain House and Museum, as our featured speaker. He will present an illustrated program on "Mark Twain in Connecticut."

Samuel Clemens (1835-1910), aka Mark Twain, described himself by saying "I am a border-ruffian from the State of Missouri. I am a Connecticut Yankee by adoption. In me, you have Missouri morals, Connecticut culture; this, gentlemen, is the combination which makes the perfect man." Although his most famous works were set along the Mississippi River of his childhood, Mark Twain composed those novels while living in the elegant literary community of Nook Farm, a neighborhood of Hartford, Connecticut. He lived halfway between Boston and New York, in a Hartford of industry, energy, and immigration while celebrating the pre-Civil War South of his youth.

Dr. Golden's program will explore the importance of Connecticut and Hartford to Twain's life and work, including his famous neighbors, such as novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, travel writer and journalist Charles Dudley Warner, Civil War hero and senator Joseph Hawley, and female suffrage campaigner Isabella Beecher Hooker.

It begins by exploring the environment in which Twain grew up: the slaveholding Mississippi River Valley before the Civil War. It then considers his life as an adult, how his politics changed, and how he emerged as a writer who defined a new phase of American identity and campaigned against the legacy of the injustice he had earlier accepted. His life is a lens into an America of rapid transformation and change.



James Golden is a Hartford, Connecticut native. He studied Divinity and History at the University of Edinburgh before completing his doctorate in Modern History at the University of Oxford in 2011. He has been a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Cambridge, and has taught history at Trinity College, the University of Hartford, and Wesleyan University. He has been the Director of Education at the Mark Twain House & Museum since March 2015, where he manages the Museum's K-12 and college education programs, and its public academic programs.

We have another treat in store for you following Dr. Golden's presentation. Local spinner and weaver Peggy Church will demonstrate silk reeling. She will utilize cocoons produced by the silkworms raised at the museum last summer. This is a rare opportunity to see how silk is hand-processed, just as it was some 200 years ago in Mansfield.

We hope you will join us on November 17, 7:30 p.m. for this special program. It will be held at the Buchanan Auditorium at the Mansfield Public Library. **Admission is free to members and children under 16; \$3.00 for non-members.**

NEWS FROM THE MUSEUM

We have just concluded another successful season at the museum. This year we were able to reclaim all of the exhibit space in the main museum building and could mount three new exhibits – one that celebrated the centennial of scouting in Mansfield, another commemorating the centennial of World War I, and a third about the archaeological investigations of Farwell House site.

However, the exhibit space in the Old Town Hall building remained unavailable in the aftermath of the condition assessment study. It is still being used for temporary collection storage. The artifacts cannot be returned to their proper storage areas until the leaking roofs and cupolas can be repaired.

Unfortunately, it remains unclear how soon any repair work can proceed. At this point there are few grant opportunities available, and much depends on the resolution of the state budget, the town's budget and the hiring of a new Town Manager.

Our museum season started off with a very successful opening on June 4. There were approximately 75 people at the event. The majority of them had come to see the scouting exhibit. Keith Wilson and Louanne Cooley not only did a great job of preparing that exhibit but also in publicizing the opening event to the scouting community. For the one-day event, members of Troop 56 also set up a display of vintage camping equipment on the museum's front lawn.

More than 100 other people visited the museum over the course of the summer. In addition to local people, visitors came from other New England states and from New York, Nebraska, Florida and California. Most visitors stayed for an extended time and were very interested in the exhibits. However, the loss of a major part of our exhibit space has resulted in lower visitation compared to other years.



There was one particularly interesting group of visitors in early July. A professor and some graduate students from the UConn

School of Medicine came to view the silkworms that were being raised. They are experimenting with the use of silk fiber as a bridge for regrowing nerves, as are many other medical researchers throughout the world. Since silk is made of pure protein, it is not rejected by the human body. Some success has been found using spider silk to regrow nerves, but the "holy grail" will be finding a way to use the silk from Bombyx Mori silkworms. Since these silkworms are commercially grown for the textile industry, their silk is much more accessible than spider silk. If this can be achieved, silk may be used to repair spinal cord injuries in the future.

This fall we are once again working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on the creation of an informational kiosk for the Mansfield Hollow Dam. This project was initiated two years ago. However, it was put on the back burner after we received the HPTAG grant for the condition assessment study. Bill Altomare, son of the dam's first tender, spearheaded this effort and continues to work with us on the project.

The kiosk will be similar to the one at the Thompson Dam. It will be a five-panel structure containing historical information, maps and

photographs. The Mansfield Historical Society will provide the text and photographs, mostly derived from our exhibit about the dam's construction. If all goes as planned, we hope to see it installed in 2018.

We are currently seeking volunteers to assist in the cataloging of new acquisitions and for exhibit preparation. If you are interesting in helping, please contact the museum at mansfield.historical@snet.net or 860-429-6575.

Ann Galonska, Museum Director

MANY THANKS to all of the volunteers who hosted at the museum this summer. And a special thank you to Pam Roberts for coordinating the volunteers and David Landry for developing the on-line sign-up system for hosts.

MEMBERSHIP REPORT

"Thank you" to all those members who have paid their 2017 dues. Our 2017 membership year ends on December 31st. Notices for renewing your membership for the 2018-year will be mailed shortly. Please watch for that mailing. Those whose dues for 2017 are still pending will receive instructions for how to handle payment. All members will have the opportunity to renew for the 2018 year. Members already paid forward through 2018 will owe nothing. Your support through membership is the foundation for our work.

Here is a summary of our membership numbers. We mail to 336 households. Of those households, 296 pay dues and the others are complimentary memberships or libraries, historical societies and other groups where our visibility and opportunity to network is important. Our percentage of up-to-date paid memberships during the 2017-year was lower than in the past. Of the 296 paying members, 191 or 65% paid their 2017 dues to date. One hundred and five (105) members still owe 2017 dues. Our first goal is to get the 2017 paid dues up to over 80% or more by December. Our second goal is to get at least 75% of the 2018 member dues paid by the end of March when second notices for 2018 dues will be mailed.

Please watch for your dues renewal letter. As Membership Chairperson, I invite your feedback, questions, referrals for new members, and inquiries about other ways you can assist Mansfield Historical Society. Contact Pam at: drpampt@gmail.com or 860 428-2406.

Pam Roberts, Membership Chairperson

CLOSE CALL FOR THE MANSFIELD CENTER GENERAL STORE

If you have driven through Mansfield Center lately, you probably have noticed the caution tape surrounding the Mansfield Center General Store and the large HELP banners attached to its front porch. The 131-year-old building in the heart of the Mansfield Center Historic District faced a preservation crisis this fall. The town of Mansfield deemed the porches on the iconic general store as in "imminent danger" of falling and declared them a public safety hazard. This apparently resulted from a complaint to the town by a visitor to the retail establishment in the building. The property owner, Shafer LLC, was given a deadline of October 1, later extended to October 10, to repair the deteriorated porches or else they would be removed. The businesses that rented space on the first floor of the building were forced to close, and the tenants living upstairs voluntarily moved out.

An engineering firm, hired and paid for by the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, evaluated the porch structure last August. Their report agrees that the porches need to be repaired, but does not conclude that they are in imminent danger of collapse, especially if the second story porch is used for emergency egress only. The report notes the conditions and presents recommendations intended to be used as a basis for the scope of repair work. The report also includes the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, as the general store is on both the national and state registries of historic buildings.

The property owners explored various ways to raise the funds needed to repair the porches or to rebuild them if they were taken down. However, they were unsuccessful in securing financing or raising adequate funds prior to the town's deadline. Gail Bruhn, Chair of the Mansfield Historic District Commission, was instrumental in aiding the property owners through this process and in seeking the assistance of the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation and the State Historic Preservation Office.

Once news of the general store's plight became public shortly before the town's imposed October 1 deadline, neighboring property owners rallied to its defense. An extension was granted to October 10 and the issue was added to the agenda of the Town Council meeting scheduled for that evening. Members of the Historic District Commission and a number of Mansfield Center residents attended the meeting and several spoke out

against the pending removal of the porches. A letter from Mary Dunne, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, was also read. It asked that the town consider stabilizing the porches instead of demolishing them, and, if that was not possible, to allow the documentation and salvage of historic building material so that the porches might be reconstructed in the future. Nevertheless, the protests by residents and the recommendations from the State Historic Preservation Office went unheeded. The town building official proceeded with plans to remove the porches. Demolition was slated for 7:00 a.m. on Monday, October 30.

Meanwhile, the owners of the general store, along Gail Bruhn of the Historic District Commission and the other interested parties continued to seek a way to save the porches. And it appears that they have been successful!

The engineer who produced the engineering report funded by the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation recommended Black Sheep Post and Beam LLC of Colchester, a construction company experienced in historic restoration work. They are currently serving as the preservation team for the Governor Jonathan Trumbull House on the Lebanon Green. The company's owner, Jason Tinelle, and a fellow carpenter inspected the porches on the general store and have agreed to do the repair work at a much reduced cost. A member of the Shafer family will pay for the repairs.

Just 20 minutes before the town offices closed on Friday, Oct. 27, a building permit was issued and the demolition order was cancelled. It seems that a happy conclusion has been reached. Work should proceed quickly. The repairs must be completed by the town imposed deadline of November 17.

While this historic preservation crisis has been averted, others will surely follow. Mansfield is fortunate to have created three historic districts that are listed on both the State and National Registers of Historic Places -- Mansfield Center, Spring Hill and Mansfield Hollow. These districts were formed "to promote the educational, cultural, economic and general welfare of the public through the preservation and protection of the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places" associated with the history of Mansfield. However, establishing a historic district that is recognized with a listing on the National Register does not guarantee the preservation of its historic resources.

The Mansfield Historic District Commission provides oversight over the local historic districts, and its regulations are intended to preserve the

integrity of the designated areas. Any proposed alterations to the exterior of historic buildings within the districts must first be approved by the Commission and a Certificate of Appropriateness be issued. It is also the responsibility of each property owner within the district to maintain their property. But this is not always enough. The community must also come together to advocate for its historic treasures. As was just seen in the case of the general store, and a few years back, in the battle over the Farwell/Jacobs barn, it takes the voices of many to prevent further loss of Mansfield's historic past.

HISTORY OF THE GENERAL STORE

With the plight of the Mansfield Center General Store in the spotlight lately, it seems an appropriate time to review its history and its significance to the community. Most of the following information is derived from Roberta Smith's research in the land records and her description of the property in the MHS publication, *Historic Mansfield Center* (2001).



The Weeks Store, built in 1886. Note that the original porch was one-story.

In 1886 Charles W. Weeks purchased 85 rods of land from Edwin Fitch, Jr. and the Buchanans and built a store on the site. A typical country store, it became a centerpiece of the Mansfield Center community. The second floor of Weeks' store served as a social center and was called Elmwood Hall. Groups gathered there for social events, discussion, and the programs of the Mansfield Center Lyceum.

In 1897 Charles Weeks sold the store to John Starkweather of Willington, who sold it five months later to Alfred Oden. Mr. Oden owned and operated the store for the next thirty years. He and his family resided on the second floor and added the upper level porch to the building.

In 1899 Alfred Oden was also appointed postmaster and the Mansfield Center Post Office moved into the store. It remained there until 1954

when the current post office was built. An interesting account of an attempted robbery of the store and post office in 1906 is included later in this issue.

The next owners of the general store were Thomas Arthur Barrows and Gustav Clauson who purchased the business in 1928. After Clauson's death, Barrows purchased his late partner's share and later his sister, Gertrude Burnham, joined him in the operation of the business.

Willard and Ann Robb purchased the business in 1957 and continued to operate the store under the Barrows and Burnham name. After her husband's death in 1964, Ann Robb ran the store until her retirement in 1997. She maintained its old-time flavor, and the store remained a much-loved fixture in the community. It was known for local produce and its high quality meats, hand-cut by Mrs. Robb herself. In an age of supermarkets and malls, Barrows and Burnham remained a place where locals could pick up a few groceries, grab a newspaper, and share news and gossip with their neighbors.

In January of 2000, Shafer Properties LLC purchased the store and reopened it in 2001 as the Mansfield Center General Store. It operated for a few years as a convenience store with a deli counter that offered soups and made-to-order sandwiches. There was also an antiques business in the side ell. Recently the property owners have rented the first floor to a series of other retail businesses.

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE GENERAL STORE

In the April 1987 issue of The Silo, the Juniper Hill Village newsletter, Grace Homer fondly recalled her childhood visits to the general store in Mansfield Center. At that time it was owned by Alfred Oden, who ran the store from 1898 to 1928.

I remember when the Mansfield Centre (Note: Centre, not Center) Post Office was in the right rear corner of The Store. Its front partition was wood wainscoting from floor to about waist level, topped by dozens of small boxes, each with its door with lock and key, which was held by whoever paid the rent on that box. In the middle of the boxes was a barred window so the mail clerk could pass out the mail. Under the boxes was a wide shelf where the mailbags could be dumped for sorting. It also held a scale to weigh a letter suspected of being overweight. If it was, it needed another two-cent stamp.

One day my mother told me to run down to the store to see if there was any mail in our box. Back I came with the news that there was. "Why did you not bring it?" "You did not tell me to bring it."

The Store was about the biggest building in the village. The top floor was where the Odens lived... While [they] were living there, their first child, Ruth, was born. She was so tiny she slept in a shoe box.

The main floor was a treasure house. As one entered through the double doors, the wall on the right was a series of open shelves, holding bolts of cloth, some underwear for men, socks, oil lamps and chimneys for them, lanterns, candlesticks, candles, men's boots, both rubber and felt, and countless other necessities of country life. In front of this wall ran a broad counter, theoretically open for measuring cloth and showing goods, but it was usually loaded with things waiting to be put away.

On the left side were similar shelves for nonperishable foods, such as salt codfish, rice, oatmeal, etc. In front of these ran a counter like the one on the other side but different in its use. At the front end was the candy case with the front and top of glass and sliding wooden doors at the back. Here were the penny candies – and they really sold not just one for a penny, but several kinds sold for as many as six for a penny. What a thrill it was to put one's nose up against the glass of the case and debate which kind gave the most for the copper you clutched in one hand.

This counter and the one across the back were used a lot to put up orders and bag things sold, not by the pound but by the bag. Sugar, for instance, sold, not at so much a pound, but by the quarter bag's worth.

The back room housed not only the meat room, but also the barrels of molasses, kerosene, and such. It had a huge walk-in refrigerator where Mr. Oden's partner, Gus Clauson, kept the sides of beef, pork, veal, and lamb.

In the basement, was a thriving business in feeds for cows, oxen, chickens, etc.

Many of the store's early fixtures, including the original post office desk, now reside at our Society's museum. Willard and Ann Robb gave them to the Society when they modernized the store in 1962.

BURGLAR SHOT BY POSTMASTER

The following article about an attempted robbery at the general store was published in The Hartford Courant on August 2, 1906.

Burglars broke into the store of Alfred Oden at Mansfield at 1:30 this morning. The store is also the Mansfield post office. In gaining entrance the



Alfred Oden's Store, ca. 1910. Note that the second-story porch has been added.

men had to break the bolt of the front door and this aroused Mr. Oden, who lives above the store. Mr. Oden, who has been visited before by burglars, woke up the other members of the household and then secured a shotgun. With the gun loaded he went to the balcony above the veranda and waited for the men. During this time the burglars were working on the safe, which is an old one. After applying the explosives they left the store and one man hid behind an elm tree directly in front of the store.

After the charge had gone off, the man behind the tree looked around to see if the noise had disturbed any one and as he did so Mr. Oden blazed away. The man was seen to reel and fall to the ground. Mr. Oden heard some one say "Come on, Joe," and he then went down stairs on to the veranda of the store, expecting to find the man he had fired at. Instead he found a derby hat riddled with shot and a pool of blood.

The shot had struck the man on the top of the head and it is believed he was carried away by his "pals" to the woods. The man was badly wounded, and he was traced for a distance of about a quarter of a mile north by the blood in the road. Here the trace was lost and it is believed that the men had a companion waiting there with a carriage. The men did not take anything from the safe for immediately after the explosion they made their hurried departure on account of the shooting.

Mr. Oden notified Captain Richmond of the local police force and he gave orders to his patrolmen to look out for the men. All the physicians in the neighborhood were notified, for it was expected that one might be called to attend to the injured man. During the day two state policemen and Deputy Sheriff Grant were at work on the case. The post office department at Washington notified Mr. Oden that a man would come to Mansfield from the Boston office to work with the other detectives on the case.

The contents of the safe consisted, aside from personal effects, of \$200 in money and stamps belonging to the government. This was strewn about the floor in front of the safe by the explosion. The door of the safe was badly damaged.

During the forenoon two men were taken from a freight train at Stafford and held pending the arrival of Deputy Sheriff Grant and the state policemen. They went to Stafford later and looked the men over. One man said that he lived at No. 20 Stone row in this city and that his name was Frank Keirans. The other was a stranger and gave a fictitious name. Captain Richmond investigated the assertion of Keirans that he lived in this city and found that it was not so. The men were held and may

be committed to jail for trespassing on railroad property, so as to have them if wanted.

Two young men applied at a saw mill in Mansfield and asked for work on Monday. They were told that no more laborers were wanted and they went away. Later it was found that they had broken into a shanty occupied by some of the employees at the mill and had stolen a lot of clothes. They were not seen after that. They are supposed to be the ones who did the job at the store. It is expected that the burglars will be caught on account of the injured man. That he needed medical attention is certain and it is thought that this necessity to get some one for their companion may show where they are.

There were two follow-up articles published in The Hartford Courant on August 4 and August 6. The suspects held in Stafford were cleared and the men who stole clothing at the saw mill in Mansfield were never found. Police concluded that the would-be robbers had escaped across the border into Massachusetts and perhaps there sought medical help for their wounded partner. The case remains unsolved. According to family lore, the bullet-ridden hat long hung on the wall in Alfred Oden's store as a conversation piece and as a deterrent to other would-be thieves. The family still owns his shotgun.

THE CRYSTAL KINGDOM: GLASS WILDLIFE SCULPTURES

Our late librarian Richard Schimmelpfeng was also an avid collector of paperweights and glass art. Shortly before his death, he donated his extensive collection to the New Bedford Museum of Glass. Pieces from his collection will be on display in the Plaza Gallery at the Homer Babbidge Library as part of an exhibit of glass wildlife sculptures on loan from the New Bedford Museum of Glass. **The exhibit opens on November 8 and runs through January 7, 2018.**

For more than 2000 years, artists and craftspeople have celebrated wildlife through the medium of glass. The exhibit showcases the broad scope and creativity of this genre of glass art. It also celebrates the rich diversity of life on this planet and seeks to raise awareness of climate change and other effects caused by human activities that challenge our natural world.

You are invited to attend the opening reception with curator Kirk J. Nelson on November 8, 4:30-6:00 p.m. Norman Stevens, Director of University Libraries, Emeritus, will make a few remarks about Richard Schimmelpfeng at this event.

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REMEMBER: November 17 – MHS Meeting & Program on Mark Twain in Connecticut
PLEASE RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP!

MANSFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY EXECUTIVE COUNCIL
2017-2018

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Ann Galonska (Museum Director)
Roberta Smith (Town Historian)