



MANSFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Vol. 54, No. 2

May 2018

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Spring arrived a few weeks ago but we certainly can't tell that from the daily temperatures lately. But as daffodils and other spring bulbs poke through the ground, we have hope that warm weather will soon be here.

Please note that our May meeting and program has been rescheduled for **Friday, May 4**. Our speaker, William Hosley, will present an overview of 18th and 19th century gravestone art in Connecticut. His talk will provide background for one of our new exhibits. Work is underway on a display of photographs and rubbings of many of the 18th century gravestones in Mansfield's cemeteries.

Inside our museum, you can certainly tell that our June 3 opening is just around the corner. The new exhibits are taking shape. Many examples of women's fashions from the mid-1800s to 1910 are being prepared for their June debut. And our general store exhibit is being transformed into a millinery shop. Many thanks to Laura Crow for her leadership in preparing the fashion exhibit. I also want to thank the following people who have spent many hours ironing, mending, steaming and dressing the mannequins: Mary Feathers, Lisa Ferriere, Ann Galonska, Anne Greineder, Kathryn Myers and June Gaeke, Emerita Professor of Costume History and Design at UMass. Our student intern, Henry Kennell has also played an important role in preparing this year's exhibits. Help is still needed so please contact the museum (860-429-6575 or mansfield.historical@snet.net) if you would like to volunteer.

We are also very grateful to Dean Anne D'Alleva, of UConn's School of Fine arts, who has generously loaned dress forms, reproduction hoop skirts and bustles, and items from the historic costume collection to make our fashion exhibit possible.

Please join us at our museum opening on Sunday, June 3, 1:30 - 4:30 p.m., when the new exhibits will be revealed. They are going to be a visual feast! Refreshments will be served under a tent on the front lawn. Once again Pam Roberts and Nancy Rucker will coordinate the refreshments. If you are willing to bake something or contribute a store-bought item or beverage, please contact Pam at 860-428-2406 or email drpampt@gmail.com.

Please note that following the opening, we will be in need of volunteers to host at the museum each weekend through the end of September. Directions on how to sign up to host follow later in this newsletter. Please consider volunteering for this important duty. It is essential to the operation of the museum. Help us share our museum's exhibits and resources with the public.

David Landry, President

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

CHANGE OF DATE: Friday, May 4, 7:30 p.m. - May Meeting and Program

Historian William Hosley will present "America's First Sculpture: Looking at Connecticut Gravestones." The program will be held in the Buchanan Auditorium at the Mansfield Public Library (54 Warrentville Road, Mansfield Center).

Sunday, June 3, 1:30 - 4:30 p.m. - Museum Opening

Following the opening, the museum will be open on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, 1:30 - 4:30 p.m. through the end of September.

MAY MEETING & PROGRAM ON MAY 4

On **Friday, May 4, 7:30 p.m.**, we will once again welcome back historian and popular speaker,

William Hosley. His program will focus on one of our earliest native arts – the fashioning, decoration and inscription of grave markers, tombstones and monuments. Hosley will explore the diverse stylistic traditions in dozens of small shops that produced gravestones from the mid-17th century to the advent of the industrial age during the mid-19th century.



William Hosley

His program will chronicle the transformation of gravestone making from a domestic craft to a modern industry and will offer insight into the domestic life, taste and cultural values of Connecticut's peoples.

From the earliest work of Connecticut stonecutters like the Griswolds of Windsor and the Stanclifts of Middle-town to the development of a mass export industry by the Bolleses and Battersons of New Preston, the story of Connecticut gravestones is a chain of innovation and expression.

William Hosley is a cultural resource development and marketing consultant, social media expert, historian, writer, and photographer. He is passionate about local history and historic preservation. He was formerly Director of the New Haven Museum and Connecticut Landmarks, where he cared for a chain of historic attractions. Prior to that, as a curator and exhibition developer at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Bill organized major exhibitions including *The Great River: Art & Society of the Connecticut Valley* (1985), *The Japan Idea: Art and Life in Victorian America* (1990), and *Sam & Elizabeth: Legend and Legacy of Colt's Empire* (1996). Bill has also served as a content specialist for PBS, BBC and CPTV film documentaries.

The program will be held in the Buchanan Auditorium at the Mansfield Public Library. General admission is \$3.00; free admission for Mansfield Historical Society members.

BUSTLES, BONNETS AND BOWS!

When Laura Crow, Emerita Professor of Costume History and Design, joined our board, we realized that this would be an opportune time to review our costume collection. Laura has been examining our collection of women's garments and accessories. With her expertise in costume history, she has more accurately dated many items, identified later alterations, and pointed out conservation concerns to be addressed.

With her guidance, we are preparing an exhibit of women's clothing and accessories,

spanning from the mid-19th century to about 1910. After examining the collection, Laura has selected 25 outfits for display. The University of Connecticut has loaned dress forms and some reproduction hoop skirts and bustles that have enabled us to properly exhibit them.

Over the past several weeks, volunteers have been working diligently to repair the garments, construct improvised undergarments, iron miles of petticoats, and pad the dress forms to custom fit each garment. For years, and sometimes decades, the selected garments had been wrapped in archival tissue and stored flat in boxes. It has been exciting to see them come to life as they are placed on dress forms with the proper undergarments that give them their intended silhouette. The result is a stunning display of fashions of the past.

Most of the outfits were worn by local women and some have interesting histories. Only a few have been exhibited before. They reveal that Mansfield women were well aware of current fashion trends despite living in a rural area.

Most of the dresses on display are made of silk or other expensive fabrics. They were likely reserved for special occasions and have survived in relatively good condition. Everyday clothes are not represented in this exhibit. Unfortunately such clothes were usually worn until they were no longer usable. Salvaged remnants were then repurposed to make smaller garments or quilts.

Part of the fashion exhibit features hats and bonnets from our collection. Our general store exhibit is being redesigned and restocked to represent a turn-of-the century millinery shop. It will feature an assortment of hats, bonnets and millinery trims. Many thanks to Zoe and Jerry Leibowitz who loaned a standing mirror for the shop display.

Millinery was a popular female occupation in the 19th century and offered women a rare opportunity to own their own business. There were a surprising number of milliners and millinery shops in nearby Willimantic. Fiona Leek has provided us with maps showing their location and much information about them. We greatly appreciate her help.

Part of the millinery display will focus on the feathered hat mania in the late 1800s. Millions of birds were slaughtered during this period to provide feathers for the millinery trade. Some hats were adorned not only with feathers but with bird wings and whole stuffed bird carcasses. Outrage over this practice led to the founding of many state Audubon Societies, the establishment of bird sanctuaries, and the passage of federal laws to protect birds. Female activists led the way, helping to change a culture.

VIEWING GRAVESTONES AS AN ARTFORM

Our other new exhibit will examine the art of 18th century gravestone carvers working in what has been dubbed the Eastern Connecticut Ornamental Style. This style is characterized by a winged cherub face surrounded by border carvings of vines or abstract geometric designs. Several noted carvers working in this tradition are represented in Mansfield's colonial cemeteries. Photographs and rubbings of gravestones carved by Obadiah Wheeler, Benjamin Collins, Josiah Manning, Gershom Bartlett, Jonathan Loomis and others will be on display. They demonstrate that a great range of artistry and originality existed within the constraints of this stylistic tradition.

Many thanks to Kathryn Myers who has taken new photographs of a number of the gravestones in the Old Mansfield Center Cemetery.

OPENING DAY: The Museum will open for the season on Sunday, June 3, 1:30-4:30 p.m.

Following the opening, the museum and research library will be open on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, 1:30 - 4:30 p.m., through the end of September. We look forward to seeing you there!

CALL FOR HOSTS & HOSTESSES

As our museum opening approaches, we are again seeking volunteers to host at the museum during the summer. Pam Roberts, Membership Committee Chair, will coordinate scheduling of hosts and hostesses again this year. Please consider volunteering and help us extend hospitality to those visiting. Greeting guests in our air-conditioned museum is a pleasant way to spend a hot summer afternoon.

We need at least one person each day and signups by two persons together are welcome. We encourage you to sign up regardless of whether you have hosted before or not. Instructions will be provided.

Many thanks to David Landry, MHS President and Web Master, for designing an online option for signing up.

WAYS TO SIGN UP FOR HOSTING:

1. Go to www.mansfieldct-history.org and click on the Hosts/Hostesses tab on the far right of the top menu. Soon the schedule will be up and you may enter your name and contact info for a slot of your choice. Pam Roberts will monitor that

master list and fill spots as needed by phone and email.

2. Call Pam Roberts at 860-428-2406 or email drpampt@gmail.com to indicate a date you would like to serve. Pam will administratively sign you up.

FAREWELL TO OUR STUDENT INTERN

We much appreciated Henry Kennell's help during the spring semester. A UConn history major, he enjoyed learning more about museum work. Now now he is embarking on yet another learning experience. We wish him well!

"From June 23rd to July 21st, I will be participating in an archaeological field school in Stobi, Macedonia through the Institute for Field Research in partnership with the Balkan Heritage Field School. Stobi was one of the largest cities in the Roman province of Macedonia and was an important urban, military, administrative, trade and religious center for the Roman and later the Byzantine Empire. During the field school, I will be involved with the excavation of a newly discovered building between the Theodosian Palace and the city jail, through which I will gain experience in basic excavation, field documentation, and contemporary 3D recording techniques. I will also get a chance to explore the history and culture of the country of Macedonia and the greater Balkan region. I am very excited for the privilege to participate in this experience!"

A MILLINER FROM MANSFIELD

By Bruce Clouette

One of Willimantic's leading milliners of the early 1900s, Matilda J. O'Neill (1867-1952), grew up in Mansfield. As a young girl, she lived with her Irish-born parents Michael and Joanna and her four brothers and sisters in company housing in Eagleville, where her father worked in the mill. When she was about seven years old, her father bought a 96-acre farm at Spring Hill, just south of where Farrell Road joins Storrs Road. This was a typical small Connecticut farm of the period: fields planted for hay, corn, oats, buckwheat, and potatoes, an orchard with 100 apple trees, a team of oxen, a plow horse, four milking cows, and lots of chickens.

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MARK YOUR CALENDAR: Meeting/Program – May 4; Museum Opening – June 3



When Matilda was about fifteen, her father sold the farm, bought a house in Willimantic, and went to work as the sexton for St. Joseph's parish. Matilda found employment first in the Holland Manufacturing Company silk mill and then in one of Willimantic's several millinery shops.

By 1905, she had her own business, in the United Bank Building at 783 Main Street (now the site of the Burton Leavitt Theatre). In her first advertisements, she proudly proclaimed that "now Willimantic has an up-to-date millinery shop," promising street-level access, the most exclusive styles, and "correct" prices. In a later ad, she picked up on a word then in vogue (1912), telling her customers to "Be Progressive, Buy your Millinery at O'Neill's." Matilda ran the business until she was in her early 50s, at which time she retired to keep house, first for her aging mother and then for her brother Felix, pastor of the Catholic church in Stafford Springs.

The arrow shows the location of O'Neill's millinery in the United Bank Building on Main Street, Willimantic.

Photograph courtesy of the Windham Textile & History Museum