

The Historical Observer

April 2015

Newsletter Of the Middlesex County Historical Society

The History of Middletown's Riverfront and Its Future to be Subject of April 29 Annual Meeting

Harken back to the days when Middletown's waterfront was alive with the sounds of ships docking at its many wharves and the cries of the stevedores loading agricultural products and unloading sugar, molasses, rum, exotic fruits, and slaves from the Caribbean. Fast forward to the late 19th century when passengers disembarked from steamers from New York, the river lined with lumber and coal yards. The 20th century then saw the nation turn to oil giving rise to tank farms all along the river. Join Society Director Debby Shapiro as she delivers the Arthur Schultz Memorial Lecture, "Down by the Riverside," at the Society's annual meeting on Wednesday, April 29 and tells all these stories and more.

Shapiro will trace the history of the waterfront from 18th century private ownership to today's mostly municipal ownership, highlighting various properties from the present-day Harbor Park to city-owned land across from the Rushford Center. To conduct her research, she searched the land records in the Town Clerk's Office and then scoured Society archives to learn about the businesses operated by the owners. The transition of maritime activities from the early agricultural and slave trade to waterfront lumber and coal yards and enamel manufacturing will be richly illustrated with photographs from the Society's collection.



Shapiro will be joined by Michiel Wackers, the Director of the Department of Planning, Conservation, and Development who will speak about the future plans for the waterfront as overseen by the Middletown Riverfront Redevelopment Commission. By the city becoming a member of the Mattabassett District, land now occupied by the Middletown waste water treatment plant will be freed up for development along with other city owned parcels. Wackers will discuss major aspects of the comprehensive plan.

Newly appointed to director in 2014, Wackers previously served as the Community Development Specialist and Deputy Director. He has a B.A. in Political Science from Elon University and an M.A. in Political Science with a concentration in public policy from the City University of New York. He works to promote economic development, while enhancing Middletown's quality of life and preservation of Middletown's natural resources.

The annual meeting will be held at the newly opened City of Middletown Senior and Community Center, the former Eckersley-Hall School, 61 Durant Terrace. The center is handicapped accessible and has parking. The business portion of the meeting will begin at 6:30 pm, with the program following at 7:00 pm. 



Middletown-Portland Bridge—Dedicated August 6, 1938

President's Message

Dear Friends,

This is the winter that won't quit, but we are cheered by new discoveries at the Mansfield House. We have begun the inventorying of our collection for the upcoming "Vanished Port" exhibit. Each day brings new surprises.

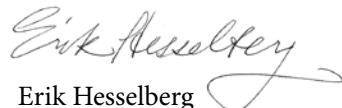
A copy of a rare early 18th century map of the Connecticut River at Middletown was found tucked amid musty papers; a glimpse of our beginnings with clusters of Native wigwams still there on the east bank that would become Portland. Upstairs with the glassware was discovered a nautical sandglass, 18th century, possibly French, employed aboard a ship to determine a vessel's speed in knots. Gazing at it, you could almost smell the salt air!

But the most impressive find was a silk damask waistcoat belonging to the 18th century sea captain, Joseph Wright Alsop, of the Alsop shipping magnates, whose fortunes began in the West Indies provisioning the slave-worked plantations of sugar islands.

We hope to share these and others finds with the public with a "Vanished Port" website and database that is now being developed with assistance from our friends at Russell Library. We'll keep you posted! The history of Middletown's riverfront is also the subject of a talk by our Executive Director Debby Shapiro during our annual meeting Wednesday April 29. We hope you can make it.

Bringing our lost seaport to life is a huge undertaking, and we will need partners to ensure our project's success. If you would like to get involved, please let us know. You can write to me care of the Society or send me an email at: erikhesselberg@comcast.net We'd love to hear from you!

Happy Spring!



Erik Hesselberg

Director's Message

Dear Members,

Although the calendar says that spring is here, there is still snow in the Mansfield House yard. Part of the herb garden has emerged from its cold blanket, and soon new shoots of green will greet me as I enter the house in the morning. I would like to thank our master gardener, Bonnie Penders, for caring for the garden for many years. Bonnie and her husband Bill have moved to Old Saybrook and she will be turning the gardening duties over to Maria Buatti and Lois Bukowiec, both excellent gardeners.

We have continued to have many visitors and researchers. Local Cub Scouts came to work on their history badge by learning how life was different for youngsters 150 years ago. They were fascinated by the 19th century toys from our collection as well as seeing pictures of the "good old days." If you have a group that would like to meet at the Mansfield House and receive a tour or program, just give me a call.

The Society will be participating in Connecticut Humanities and History Rally Day at the State Capitol on Wednesday, April 8. I will be taking several artifacts to display in the Hall of Flags at the invitation of independent historian, William Hosley. The Connecticut League of History Organizations, Connecticut Humanities Council, Connecticut Historical Society, and Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation are sponsoring the day to call

attention to all the worthwhile events and projects sponsored by local organizations such as ours that are funded through the Connecticut Humanities Council and the Connecticut Humanities Fund. Appropriations to these two entities were eliminated in the governor's budget proposal and the history and humanities communities in the state are making our legislators aware of the positive impact that the humanities have on the fabric of life in our state. Please encourage your legislators to restore this vital funding.

We are again marching in the Memorial Day parade. If you would like to march with us, meet us at the corner of Stack Street and Pease Avenue at 10:00 am on Monday, May 25. You do not have to dress in costume, but it is fun if you do.

Please join us at the annual meeting on Wednesday, April 29 at the new Senior and Community Center. The business meeting will include reports from the president and treasurer, adoption of the proposed budget as outlined in this newsletter, and approval of minutes, followed by the program, "Down by the Riverside." See you then.



Debby Shapiro

Dione Longley and Buck Zaidel to Headline Society Fundraiser

The Society is pleased to announce that Dione Longley and Buck Zaidel will give an illustrated lecture at a reception being held to raise funds for the maintenance of the Society's headquarters, the General Joseph Mansfield House. The event will be held on Friday, June 19 at 7:00 pm at the Inn at Middletown.

Longley and Zaidel are the co-authors of *Heroes for All Time: Connecticut Civil War Soldiers Tell Their Stories* recently published by Wesleyan University Press. The book presents the war straight from the minds and pens of its participants: rich passages from soldiers' letters and diaries complement hundreds of outstanding period photographs, some from the Society's collection. Rare war artifacts pictured make a connection to the men and boys who once owned them. While so many books written about the Civil War feature the activities of generals and politicians, *Heroes for All Time* tells the stories of the men in the trenches and the families waiting at home for news of their loved ones.

Dione Longley is an independent historian and writer. For two decades, she served as the director of the Society and curated a number of exhibits chronicling the history of Middletown, including the award winning Civil War exhibit, *Hard-tack, Salt Pork, and Faith*. Buck Zaidel, a dentist and longtime Civil War enthusiast, collects objects and images related to Union soldiers' daily lives. He has exhibited at Civil War and antique arms shows across the country and contributed items to museum exhibitions, including *Photography and the American Civil War* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The price for the event, including a dessert reception following the talk, is \$35.00 per person. Opportunities for sponsorship are also available. All sponsors will receive a listing in the program and will be able to meet Di and Buck and tour the Society's exhibit *Hard & Stirring Times: Middletown and the Civil War* prior to the talk at 6:15 p.m.

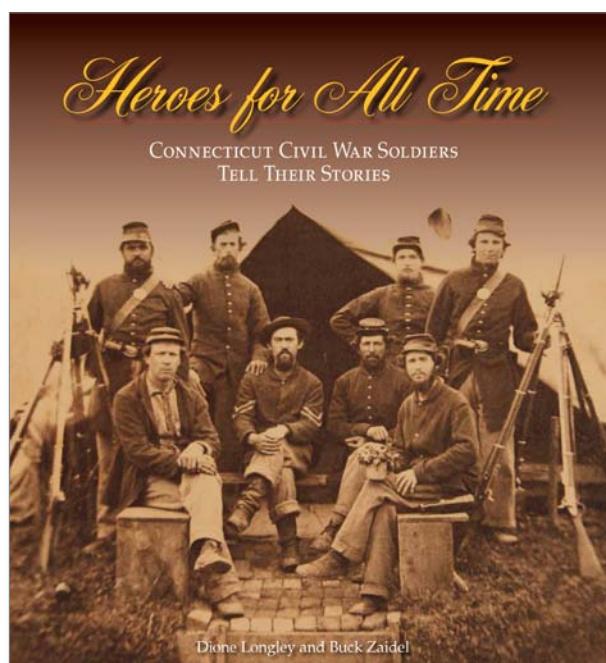


Named for Middletown men featured in the book, sponsorship categories are as follows:

- Major General Joseph K. F. Mansfield - \$1000.00
Sponsor receives 8 tickets
- Captain Elijah Gibbons - \$750.00
Sponsor receives 6 tickets
- Captain John G. Pelton - \$500.00
Sponsor receives 4 tickets
- Sergeant Isaac Truitt - \$250.00
Sponsor receives 2 tickets

Di and Buck's book will be available for purchase and inscription. Those wishing to purchase the book in advance and having it inscribed prior to the event for

pick-up at the event may do so by purchasing a ticket for \$80.00. To purchase tickets or become a sponsor call the Society at 860-346-0746. Join us as we commemorate the end of the bloody conflict that took roughly 6000 Connecticut lives in the struggle to save the union and abolish slavery.



SOCIETY NEWS

One Mystery is Solved

In answer to our query as to the identity of the school cafeteria ladies, we received calls from Vinnie Loffredo, John Uccello, and Debbie Gill, each able to identify one or more of the ladies pictured. The key to unlocking all their identities came when Debbie said that one of them was Diana Doyle's mother. Diana's mother, Josephine Saraceno knew all of the ladies, pictured in the Middletown High School cafeteria. They are from left to right: Josephine Saraceno, Mary Milardo, Ellen Salafia, Jenny Scotti, Grace Spada, Maria DiMauro, and Irene Violette. Thank you to all our detectives! 



Spring Is On the Way in the Rose Garden

Although there is still snow on the ground in the back yard, the rose bushes planted last year are visible from the Mansfield House windows. More will be planted this year thanks to the following donors: Peter & Ruth McGee, Susan & Dennis Vitro, Judy Kopman-Fried, and Michael & Susan Cummins in honor of Sally D'Aquila's special birthday; Sally & Sal D'Aquila in memory of Alex Strand and Diane Browning; and Debby Shapiro in memory of Estelle Goodman. If you would like to remember or honor a loved one by purchasing a rose bush, please contact Debby Shapiro. 



Society Welcomes New Members

We have welcomed many new visitors to the General Mansfield House and are pleased to report that a number have become new members. Joining our ranks are Elaine Bank; Stephanie & Mary Green & Francis Selleck; Kati Hensel; John LeShane; Jim & Barbara McAuliffe; Ellen & Armand LaPointe; Daniel, Kathy & Julie Pickett; and our newest life member, Andrew Osgood. Please greet them at our upcoming events.

The annual membership renewal letters have gone out in the mail. Please respond as quickly as possible to keep your membership current. We appreciate your support of our activities and efforts to preserve Middletown's history. 



Middlesex County Historical Society Membership Application

Your membership in the Middlesex County Historical Society helps provide funding for the preservation of Middlesex County's historical treasures as well as your subscription to the *Historical Observer* and discounts to many of the Society's events.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____

E-mail _____

Membership Levels

| | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student \$20 | <input type="checkbox"/> Business \$60 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual \$30 | <input type="checkbox"/> Patron \$125 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family \$40 | <input type="checkbox"/> Life \$500 |

Please make checks payable to The Middlesex County Historical Society. Detach and send to General Mansfield House, 151 Main Street, Middletown, CT 06457

Senior and Community Center: *Scenes from a Historical Site*

A school had stood on the site of what is now the City of Middletown Senior and Community Center as early as 1874, when the Beers Atlas of that year shows Durant School situated in the triangle created by Lake Street, Birdsey Avenue, Durant Street and Park Street, now Durant Terrace. The Durant School was in the Town School District, one of two school districts in town. The Middletown Press reported on March 5, 1928 that sparks from the school chimney set fire to the old and dry roof shingles.

Principal Miss Margaret N. Lucey sounded the alarm and

led 120 students to safety. Despite the efforts of the fire department, the roof was completely lost, but much of the contents such as a piano, desks, and books were saved.

The students were temporarily transferred to Farm Hill School while the parents of the Durant District and the Town Board of Education debated whether to repair the brick building or build a new, more modern one. The parents' desire to have a new building was fulfilled and Linus Baldwin was hired to raze the old building and commence construction on the new one in June 1928.

The new building was dedicated on March 28, 1929 in a ceremony led by Van Buren Moody, the superintendent of the Town Schools. Also participating were Mayor Frederick Bielefield; Raymond Wamester, president of the Durant Parent-Teacher Association; and Bertrand Spencer, chairman of the Town School Board. The new building was named Eckersley-Hall School in memory of Herbert Eckersley and Frederick L. Hall, neighborhood men who had lost their lives in World War I. Leftover funds raised for welcome-home events for soldiers were used to provide the bronze lettering over the entrance.

Artist Albert L. McCutcheon painted a colorful mural for



Eckersley-Hall School

the kindergarten room in the school depicting life in Middletown including the Connecticut River, local buildings, and schoolchildren, as well as a fanciful elephant. McCutcheon was born in Middletown in 1901 and studied art at the Yale School of Fine Arts and the Julian Academy in Paris, France. In the 1930's, he was commissioned by the Works Progress Administration to paint murals and easel paintings for public buildings including one for Woodrow Wilson High School and the whimsical one for Eckersley-Hall School. In 1987, the school was purchased by St Sebastian Church and became its parochial school. After being transferred to the City of Middletown in March 2011, the building has achieved new life as the Senior and Community Center.

The School's Namesakes

Herbert Eckersley was born in Bolton, England on September 16, 1894. He came to this country as an infant with his parents, Thomas and Mary Eckersley. He initially enlisted in Company C of the 102nd U.S. Infantry as a bugler on March 15, 1912. At the time of his enlistment, he was variously reported as working at Russell Manufacturing Company or Middlesex Machine Works. Company C originated in



Albert L. McCutcheon, mural painter

(continued on next page)



Herbert Eckersley (left) and Frederick L. Hall (right), courtesy of the Connecticut State Library.

Middletown as the Mansfield Guards in 1847. Eckersley saw duty on the Mexican border in 1916 defending a border dispute during Mexico's civil war. He rose to become the orderly to Major George J. Rau of Hartford, whom he called the "best officer in the American line and a true gentleman" in his last letter home from France. Word was received by his parents that he died on July 24, 1918. Both Eckersley and Rau met their deaths at Chateau Thierry during the Aisne-Marne offensive, and the body of Herbert Eckersley was returned to Middletown in July 1921. Eckersley was buried in Pine Grove Cemetery with full military honors, after a service at his parents' home across from the school that would later bear his name.

Frederick L. Hall, the son of Leon and Lena Hall of

Highland Avenue enlisted in Company C in 1917 at the age of 19. At the time of his enlistment, he was employed by Wilcox, Crittenden & Co. On September 17 of that year, Company C, part of the 102nd U. S. Infantry, the "Yankee Division", sailed for France to participate in the Great War. He lost his life on April 20, 1918 when the Germans invaded the Toul sector at Seicheprey in France. The attack by the German regiment known as "Hindenberg's Traveling Circus" was so fierce that it resulted in hand-to-hand combat. His body was returned to Middletown in June 1921. Hall was buried in Trinity Cemetery, Portland, with full military honors. Sadly his father, who also worked at Wilcox, Crittenden, died July 3, 1918 shortly after his son made the supreme sacrifice for his country. 

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Mayor's Ball
Wadsworth Mansion

Saturday, April 18, 7:00 pm

"Down by the Riverside" & Annual Meeting
Middletown Senior & Community Center

Wednesday, April 29, 6:30 pm

Memorial Day Parade
Meet at corner of Stack St. and Pease Ave.

Monday, May 25, 10:00 am

Sheedy Contest Reception
Mansfield House

Wednesday, May 27, 6:00 pm

***Heroes For All Time* fundraiser**
Inn at Middletown

Friday, June 19, 7:00 pm

Proposed 2015–2016 Budget

The Treasurer will present the annual report and proposed budget at the Society's annual meeting.

| | 2013-14 Actual | 2014-15 Budget Budget | 2014-15 Actual Actual (1.092 x Feb YTD) | 2015-16 proposed proposed budget |
|---|-------------------|--------------------------|---|--|
| INCOME | | | | |
| Operating Income | | | | |
| Donations (net) | \$29,713 | \$20,000 | \$17,117 | \$20,000 |
| Events, fundraisers (net) | \$6,607 | \$10,000 | \$5,498 | \$10,000 |
| Gift shop (net) | \$801 | \$1,500 | \$1,274 | \$1,500 |
| House, grounds rental | \$0 | \$0 | \$100 | \$0 |
| Membership dues | \$11,045 | \$10,000 | \$10,670 | \$10,000 |
| Miscellaneous (including royalties) | \$202 | \$500 | \$269 | \$500 |
| Newsletter ads | \$60 | \$0 | \$0 | \$0 |
| Research fees | \$1,818 | \$2,000 | \$1,864 | \$2,000 |
| Total Operating Income | \$50,246 | \$44,000 | \$36,792 | \$44,000 |
| Investment Income | | | | |
| Merrill Lynch transfer | \$19,000 | \$25,800 | \$38,500 | \$25,800 |
| Collections, capital savings transfers | \$500 | \$500 | \$0 | \$500 |
| Total Investment Income | \$19,500 | \$26,300 | \$38,500 | \$26,300 |
| TOTAL INCOME | \$69,746 | \$70,300 | \$75,292 | \$70,300 |
| EXPENSES | | | | |
| Office | | | | |
| Accounting | \$2,500 | \$2,500 | \$2,500 | \$2,500 |
| Miscellaneous | \$800 | \$700 | \$602 | \$700 |
| Office supplies | \$2,190 | \$2,000 | \$1,268 | \$2,000 |
| Postage | \$1,077 | \$1,000 | \$821 | \$1,000 |
| Printing | \$1,282 | \$1,100 | \$1,061 | \$1,100 |
| Telephone & internet | \$1,102 | \$1,200 | \$1,144 | \$1,200 |
| Total Office | \$8,951 | \$8,500 | \$7,396 | \$8,500 |
| Facilities & Collections | | | | |
| Collections maintenance | \$350 | \$500 | \$0 | \$500 |
| Electricity | \$3,082 | \$4,100 | \$3,249 | \$4,100 |
| Fuel oil | \$7,228 | \$6,500 | \$6,561 | \$6,500 |
| Insurance, non-employee | \$8,146 | \$8,200 | \$8,170 | \$8,200 |
| Maintenance & capital improvements | \$2,369 | \$3,000 | \$4,221 | \$3,000 |
| Total Facilities & Collections | \$21,175 | \$22,300 | \$22,201 | \$22,300 |
| Personnel | | | | |
| Total Personnel | \$39,500 | \$39,500 | \$37,916 | \$39,500 |
| TOTAL EXPENSES | \$69,626 | \$70,300 | \$67,513 | \$70,300 |
| (Income) - (Expenses) | \$120 | \$0 | \$7,779 | \$0 |