

## Windows to Westport's Past & Present: WPA Images of Historic Houses

Don't miss the current exhibit which runs until March 26<sup>th</sup>. It's a collection based on 131 photographs of Westport houses taken in 1935, during the height of the Great Depression. Most were made for the Depression era Works Progress



*Three generations of family have been docents for several years. Thank you to Patricia Plunkett, her granddaughter Molly Coe and daughter Dawn Sessa at the Carpenter house at this year's HHT.*

Administration (WPA) by Westport resident T. O'Connor Sloane Jr. (1879-1963). They show houses that were at least 100 years old when photographed, and, for comparison, are presented side by side with current images of the same houses. Most of the new photos were taken by the WHS's House Historian, Bob Weingarten, who also curated the exhibit. Bob came up with the idea for the exhibit when he happened upon the WPA photos in the Society's Archives. Shot in black and white, the WPA photos have the word history written all over them. The current images were shot in color, but at the same angle as the WPA images to make the contrast between then and now reflect changes in the houses.

"Past and Present" displays more than 80 of the WPA images,

with their matching current photos and those not on the walls of the Betty R. and Ralph Sheffer Gallery and the Mollie Donovan Room are available in folders. Some of the houses look strikingly similar today, while others are virtual-

ly unrecognizable.

The homes selected to be photographed for the WPA bear witness to Westport's long history as a haven for artists and writers. One stands in the Historic District on Kings Highway North and once belonged to Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and literary critic Van Wyck Brooks. Another was a jazz studio, and still another, now the home of WHS

President Edward F. Gerber, was formerly the residence of George Hand Wright, one of the leading figures of the town's art colony back in the Thirties and Forties.

The display in the Mollie Donovan Room is given over to the homes of artists and examples of their work. A 1935 image hangs next to Wright's pastel of Robin's Nest, the house in which Betty Sheffer and her sister, Susan Malloy, grew up. Sheffer and Malloy went on to play influential roles in the world of art, Malloy as a painter and Sheffer as an arts advisor to President William Clinton. Both also made significant contributions to the work of the Westport Historical Society.

The former homes of film star Paul Newman and lifestyle maven Martha Stewart were also photographed for the WPA project, but this was years before either became the owner. Bob's research on the history of the two homes turned up this interesting tidbit: when the actor was launching his Newman's Own brand of salad dressings, he took a bottle to Stewart's Long Lots Road home for a taste testing.

Each wall of the WHS's octagonal Sheffer Gallery features a different aspect of the exhibit. The centerpiece – on the wall facing the entrance to the gallery – is a 1935 mural by Westport artist Arthur Elder that normally hangs in the Town Clerk's office

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at Town Hall. The mural is Elder's rendition of a map of Greens Farms surrounded by likenesses of people, houses and churches from the town's 300-year history. It is accompanied by



photos of some of those houses and historical sites today. Another wall of the gallery presents a reproduction of an actual 1935 map that gives the location of 102 historic houses. In the margins are drawings of 17 of the houses, and on the wall are current images of most. Yet another wall identifies houses with unique historical aspects. For example, a house on Cross Highway owned by patriot Samuel Meeker was fired on by the British during their 1777 raid on the Danbury arsenal. The skirmish left a musket ball lodged in the front door, and there it remained for the next 200 years. Sometime in the late 1940s or early '50s, however, the musket ball vanished, never to be



seen again. Now the only evidence of the Revolutionary War incident is a small hole in the aged door.

One of the show's crown jewels is the Long

Lots Road home of Dutch Wynkoop, whose late wife, Susan, was a former president of the Society. This beautiful, dark red dwelling has been dated to the mid-1680s and is considered to be the town's oldest structure.

A number of the houses have been modified or added onto over the years, but if you look closely at the past and present images you can see the outlines and features of the originals, though you may have to count windows and focus on the locations of doorways to determine what part of the structure was present in 1935 and what part is more recent.

by Bob Weingarten

## *From the Executive Director's Desk...*



*We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give.* Winston Churchill said these profound words of wisdom and they

fit in so beautifully with what the Westport Historical Society is all about. What does WHS give back to the town? It is a welcoming place that invites you to come and investigate and be inspired. A visitor recently came in to make a purchase in the Remarkable Gift Shop and we exchanged a few words and I was happy she came in and she was thrilled with her purchase and her experience. About a week later, she came back and said "I'd like to make a donation to your organization". Again, I welcomed her and thanked her for her kind gift. It was a generous one and it came because she enjoyed her experience visiting WHS. An unexpected gift, however, why should I be surprised she gave? We

thrive on the generosity of people who donate to support our beautiful facility and our programs. After all, we are a voluntary organization and member-supported, not town-funded. We embrace all of the community in our programming; youth and adults alike. The good news is that people have a lot to give back and why not use the Westport Historical Society building?

Members of WHS are offering wonderful programs this winter- a Wednesday morning watercolor class with Karen Siegel, a Saturday afternoon writing class with Judith Marks-White and a Tuesday evening meditation class with Joy Abrams. We're honored to host classes that enrich, empower and bring joy to our community. We also invite local historians to share their knowledge like Robert Weingarten, our house historian, whose current exhibit on historic houses is truly a testament to the desire to keep older homes a part of the local landscape and Robert is excited to share his knowledge and expertise. Our

archives group and oral history committee meet regularly to research as well as record residents of Westport who have lived here for over 50 years. People love to share their stories about life in Westport; a small artistic haven on the Saugatuck River. We remember the significant historical events that transpired here; the Battle at Compo in 1777 is one, but now we fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and look ahead to the future.

The Westport Historical Society is thriving with the passion of so many people who love what the town represents and cherishes and celebrates its rich culture. We are on the path to keep our history safe; write about it, sing about it and communicate it as often as we can.

Thank you for being part of the WHS family and helping to make this journey a great adventure for us all.

Susan Gold, Executive Director

*Scenes from our Holiday House Tour Soirée at Lillian August*



*Kelle Ruden, First Selectman Jim Marpe and The magician, Eric Wilzig.*



*Patrick Sikorsky checking out the art .*



*Mr. and Mrs. Mays with Elizabeth Ethridge McGann from Lillian August.*

## *Happy Campers in Our Educational Program*



## *Miggs Burroughs: a one-of-a-kind local artist who keeps Westport's "look" alive.*



Miggs Burroughs, the talented designer-artist who has contributed so much to the Westport community and to the Historical

Society, has been recognized by writer Woody Klein in a six-page color brochure now available. Miggs is described by Woody as "a one-of-a-kind local artist who keeps Westport's 'look' alive." Both Miggs and Woody, a long-time columnist for the Westport News, are members of the WHS Advisory Board and contribute in many ways to the Society. They combined talents to design and research and write the only modern history of Westport, titled: "Westport, Connecticut, The Story of a New England Town's Rise to Prominence," with a foreword by Joanne Woodward, published in 2000, the 165th

anniversary of the founding of the Town of Westport in 1835. Klein adds: "Miggs's philosophy as an artist is simple: 'Communicating a lot with a little.' Last year, he unveiled a unique exhibit, appropriately named 'Tunnel Vision,' in a public walkway that links Main Street to Parker Harding Plaza and includes 16 photos of the hands of couples. Using a 'smoke and mirrors' technique known as lenticular imagery, Burroughs photos take viewers into different directions depending on the angle of the view. He calls the project "the most rewarding and ambitious project of my career." Go to [www.tunnelvisionart.com](http://www.tunnelvisionart.com)

Among Miggs' other contributions to the Town of Westport over the years are the Town Flag, now flown atop Town Hall, the public school logo, which can be seen on the public school buses and all inter-school communications, and the logos of the Westport Historical Society, Levitt Pavilion, and Friends of Parks & Recreation, among many more.

A limited edition of the brochure is available at the Westport Historical Society, or online at [www.westporthistory.org](http://www.westporthistory.org).

*Excerpt from the brochure by Woody Klein*

## President's Message



I am sure that all of you know that preserving historic/antique homes and neighborhoods is a great passion of mine. I have done

all that I can do to preserve my 1764 saltbox by first having it designated as a local historic landmark property, and then later by having it added to the National Register of Historic Places.

In the same spirit, when I moved to Westport I assumed that the WHS Holiday House Tour would be a showcase for the best historic houses. This had been the approach taken by the

preservation organizations to which I belonged in Washington DC, where I lived most of my life. So I was surprised when I worked on my first Holiday House Tour several years ago, and found that no historic homes were on the tour, and only a couple were architectural reproductions.

This year we were determined to change that approach: in this year's tour, five of the six properties were historic, including one from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and four from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The sixth, while newly constructed, incorporated features from historic neighboring houses into its design, and many tourgoers were surprised to learn that it had been built only recently. All

of these homes offered proof that saving historic homes for use by 21<sup>st</sup> Century families is not only possible, but also a good idea. Significantly, only one of the properties had been a designated landmark, meaning that the owners of the other four historic properties were not *obliged* to invest in the thorough restorations that they undertook. But they chose to do so, and the results are stunning. Many tour-goers commented that this was the best tour in years because our historical society was this time showcasing *historic* houses. I hope that in the future the WHS will continue to make an effort to include houses that depict the history of our town.

Edward F. Gerber

## StEPs-CT

A year ago, Executive Director Sue Gold and a group of Board members braved the snow to attend the first StEPs-CT workshop in Hartford. StEPs-CT is a two-year program for historical organizations in Connecticut designed to improve performance and increase professionalism among the staff and governing bodies, provided jointly by the Connecticut League of Historical Organizations and Connecticut Humanities.

Westport Historical Society is one of 23 organizations from around the state enrolled in the 2015-2016 session. We meet every month to learn, discuss issues and accomplishments, and compare notes with sister organizations (our working group includes historical organizations and museums from

Wilton, Weston, Newtown, and Danbury.)

During 2015 we covered three modules: Mission/Vision/Governance, Audience, and Management. The topics ranged from board orientation and manuals, and attendance measurement to disaster planning, security, and liability. Did you know that a not-for-profit which sells tickets to a fund-raiser at which wine is served might require a liquor license? Who knew?

This year the group will study Collections, Historic Buildings, and Interpretation (exhibits and programs). StEPs-CT is proving to be a valuable experience for all of us responsible for the growth and management of your Westport Historical Society.

## Teach It

From November 2014 to May 2015, Westport Historical Society presented Saugatuck@Work, an exhibit with related programs celebrating the rich history of old Saugatuck, the early transportation and commercial center of what was to become Westport. The centerpiece of the exhibit was the Robert Lambdin mural donated to the town by TD Bank and restored with a grant from CT Humanities. (The mural now resides permanently at Town Hall.)

In the spring of 2015, the Westport School system and WHS revived the third grade field trip, a central piece of the social

studies program under the new Core Curriculum. Based on the success of that effort, Westport Public Schools submitted the program to the state for inclusion in the new Teach It effort. Teach It ("Bringing Connecticut History to the Classroom") is an online resource for teachers across the state, with modules for Grades 3, 5 and 8. The Saugatuck program was accepted and is now a permanent part of the Grade 3 offering, "Connecticut and Local History". Kudos to all involved!

The Teach It site may be viewed at: [www.teachitct.org](http://www.teachitct.org)

by Robert Mitchell



Westport Historical Society  
Get Connected.

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## Upcoming Events: February to May 2016

Go to [westporthistory.org](http://westporthistory.org) for updates and more information on all events.  
For reservations, call: 222-1424 • M-F, 10 am – 4:30 pm, Saturday, Noon – 4 pm

### Children's Vacation Programs

February 16, 17, 18  
April 12, 13, 14

Thursday, April 28: Danbury Raid Talk  
Friday, April 8: Coffeehouse at The Wheelers  
Sunday, May 1: Minute Man Day at Compo Beach

### Walking Tours

Saturday, April 2: Business District  
Saturday, April 16: Saugatuck  
Saturday, May 14: Kings Highway  
Saturday, May 21: Main Street



If you are not a member,  
we invite you to join.  
Please visit our website:  
[www.westporthistory.org](http://www.westporthistory.org)  
and go to the  
Membership page  
or call 203-222-1424.

