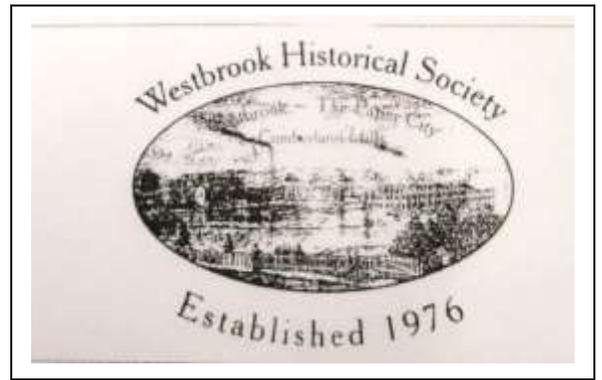


Westbrook Historical Society

"A Society That Preserves the Past"

Spring 2021 Newsletter

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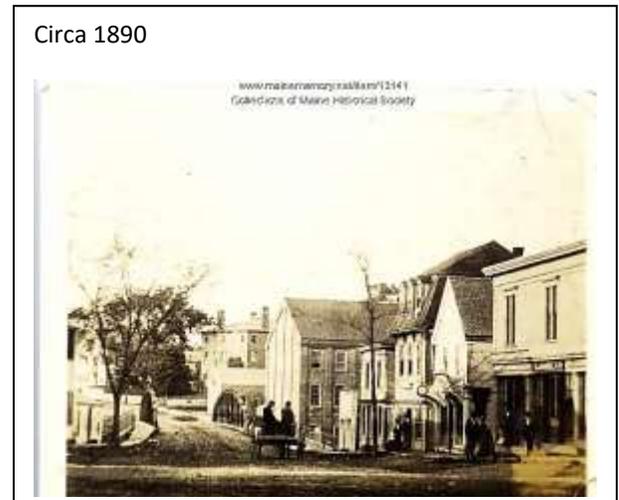


Corner of Main and Bridge Streets

Bridge and Main Streets afford Westbrook with its busiest corner. The building on the corner has evolved through many uses and been partially destroyed by fire. It has always been a center for Social, Retail and Fraternal Activities. Once again this area is being rebuilt and repurposed.

The building was originally built by Captain John Warren in 1849 and later owned by George and Lewis Warren, his sons who were prominent lumbermen. Originally the ground floor was occupied by Harlan P. Murch, old-time grocer who was the merchant on that floor. The hall in the upper stories was G. A. R. Hall, while other organizations and societies have also met in the building throughout the years and it has always remained more or less of a center for social and fraternal activities.

Later the ground floor of the block was occupied by the Vallee Drug Store, the First National Grocery, Tom's Restaurant and the Rocheleau clothing store.



Carr Block Fire on Friday, February 13, 1942 was the scene of a general alarm fire fanned by two terrific explosions which destroyed the three and one-half story building on Main Street causing an estimated loss of \$200,000. It was the fourth major fire in the old block since 1934.. A ladder was put up to rescue a 91 year old woman who was carried down from a second floor window and which four other residents of the upper floors used to reach safety. The corner was the site of the Vallee drug store in which Rudy Vallee, famed radio star, once worked for his father.

Fire Chief Robert S. Burrows said the major fire was caused by explosion of an oil stove in the rear of a beer parlor owned by Ovila J. Boissonneau after fireman had killed a minor blaze there. The oil burner exploded, sending "streams" of flames into the adjoining Carr's Shoe Store and through the ceiling into Vallee's Drug Store, Tom's Restaurant, Rocheleau's Clothing Store, the First National Store, F. W. Woolworth's and the McLellan Store which was the scene of a \$5,000 fire three weeks ago.



The two hydrants located in Vallee Square were frozen, necessitating the laying of lines from Mechanic Street. A group of by-standers were given a soaking when a Portland fireman dropped a line of hose which swirled into the crowd, composed mostly of Westbrook High School students.

The rear of the beer parlor, shoe store and cobbler's store were a complete loss, and according to the owner, the only thing that may be salvaged is the front windows and frames. Water gushed from stairways and store fronts for several hours after the blaze was killed. In front of Tom's Restaurant water and frozen chemical were knee deep and on the Bridge Street side of Vallee Drug Store ice was piled two and one-half feet deep. Vallee Block looked like a Christmas card with sagging electric light and telephone wires festooned with ice and store windows loaded with ice layers inches thick. Zero temperatures at the height of

the blaze were a severe hardship to firemen. The flame spread so rapidly through the building that all firemen were ordered from it, and though water from nearly a score of lines was played on it for three hours, it burned fiercely for three hours until the slate roof and portions of the side and rear walls collapsed.

Again the fire was believed to have been bought under control only to have a second explosion rip through the structure. This blast moved the side of the building away from the main structure nearly six feet, sending sparks and blazing brands 40 feet into the air and endangering the whole Bridge Street business area, which extends 300 feet to the Presumpscot River bridge.



Lester Clarke Discovered Fire that Destroyed the Carr Block
American Journal July 1964

The winter of 1942 was studded with a series of Westbrook fires totaling \$240,000 damage. The worst of the fires completely demolished the "Carr Block" owned by Edwin B. Carr. Included in the loss were Carr's Shoe Store, Boissoneau's beer parlor on Bridge Street, a cobbler shop, Vallee Pharmacy, Tom's Café, Rocheleau's Clothing Store, Woolworth's, the First National Store, offices of Dr. Arthur Blake and Dr. Ralph M. Whitney. The loss was estimated day at \$150,000. Six tenants in apartments above the first floor fled safely, when alerted by police – three women by ladder, the men by stairway. Patrolman Lester M. Clarke discovered the blaze about 3:20 am. Although it was under control five hours after discovery, the blaze still smoldered into the midafternoon. Firemen were thwarted in their effort to battle the raging inferno by ice forming on the street as they poured tons of water into the blazing building. The building was so badly damaged with walls tilting at alarming angles that it was condemned by Fire Chief Burrows.

With fire spreading so rapidly, help from Portland and South Windham was summoned. Two Portland crews and engines assisted in quelling the blaze.

The McLellan's fire totaling \$40,000 damage was touched off by a window shattering explosion believed started by spontaneous combustion of painter's supplies stored in the basement. Fireproof walls were credited with preventing the blaze from spreading to the adjoining Woolworth's Store (which burned up anyway in the Carr fire).

Ironically enough, also destroyed in the fire were the inventory records which had been saved from McLellan's store three weeks earlier when McLellan's was burned out!

The third fire, on January 22 tallied a \$50,000 loss and destroyed the Webber Grain and Feed Co. Store and Storage Sheds at Pride's Corner. The Webbers lost their own home along with the store. Mrs. Webber salvaged only her canary, a fur coat and two dresses. Fireman Theodore Gallant injured a leg falling through the floor of the burning grain storage section.

Fortunately for Westbrook it has never seen another winter like that of 1942.



Rebuilding the Vallee Block

Chris Grimm, owner of the block was planning to spend about \$200,000 on renovations. The building at Vallee Square is dominated by fake stone Blocks on the lower portion of the walls and drab stucco on the upper parts. Duct tape covers window cracks at Aquatic Concepts, an aquarium business that occupied the most prominent location of the corner of Main and Bridge Street. The rehabilitation plan called for a row of new windows with granite sills, new stucco surfaces and built out columns that may be topped with lights. A historic granite molding may be retained if it is hidden beneath the stucco as suspected. The property today bears no resemblance to its historic roots. The building is made up of a three-story building that was heavily damaged by fire in 1942. The building once housed a pharmacy owned by the parents of the crooner and actor Rudy Vallee. Grimm's company, Waves Edge LLC, bought the property for \$554,600 in January 2006. The owners of the Uffa restaurant in Portland are planning to open a new establishment called The Frog and Turtle in the restaurant space. The Edwards Jones office planned to move to the Edwards Block.



The Frog and Turtle Restaurant on Bridge Street is now on the former site of Carr's Shoe Store and has recently added a top floor with outside dining and views of the river.



Earlier Fire Damages the Carr Block

February 15, 1934 – Three Westbrook Stores Prey of Flames - As firemen fought Westbrook's \$28,000 fire Wednesday evening in the heart of the business section. The clouds of smoke are rolling from the McLellan store which suffered more than three-quarters of the total damage. F. W. Woolworth's store on the left and a large Atlantic & Pacific store on the right were damaged by smoke and water.

Excerpts from an Oral History given by Nellie Davis Spiller

Given 1/19/77 to Beverly Canales

My father, Charles Davis, born 1858, was at the time of his death in 1953, the oldest living native in Westbrook. The house where he was born at Rocky Hill stands across the Methodist Road from the small Cobb family burial plot lying very close to the road. Here lie his Cobb grandparents, Asa and Nancy Dole, near their house where his mother, Apphia, was born in 1828.

In 1974, when I wanted to learn who built that house no one in town, no one that I could find, not even the present owner's, the Paulsens, who bought the house in 1938, could remember its ever being called anything but the Hacker house. On the 1758 map atlas of Cumberland County, it is marked as J. Winslow. On the 1871 atlas of Cumberland County, it is Hackett, Hacker. When he died he left the place to his daughter and son-in-law, Isiah Hacker. But further research at the Registry of Deeds, proves that the house was built by Josiah's grandfather, James Winslow. And this James Winslow, was the grandson of another James Winslow, who was the first one of that family name to settle in the old Falmouth area. He was there in 1728, he first had land on Back Bay, he had land on Broad Bay, and then he, because of Indian trouble, he left and settled by 1743 on a large estate, you might call it, more than 200 acres of very fine farm land and forest land on the Presumpscot River. There here, down by the river, built a small house, and in 1748, he built a larger more elegant and more pretentious house. There wasn't any

road by his place in those days, it was just the river. In 1752 what was Bridge Street, was continued on to what we refer to as Proctor's Mills, or Proctor's Bridge. And around 1800 some later member in the Winslow decent moved that house from the river area up nearer to East Bridge Street and put an addition onto the house. That house is still standing, the oldest one in Westbrook. The present owner is Dr. Ira Stockwell and this house is now surrounded by modern homes of a recent housing development.



It was in this house, in a room off the old kitchen, that the first school of any kind was held within the confines of Westbrook. And in this same room, were held the meetings of the Society of Friends until the time that

they had a meeting house built out on Forest Avenue, probably about 1852. That's the Quakers, the official name of the Quakers. These people, the Winslows were Quakers.

One summer, probably in 1873, between school terms at White Rock, my father stayed with his Uncle, Edward Cobb, on the Methodist Road, near the junction of East Bridge Street. Each day, he rode with his Uncle to work at the old Duck Pond, at a mill on the Old Duck Pond Road, near the bridge over Mill Brook, not far from Highland Lake Corner. Here were made wooden products, pails, and bails, and shooks or barrels. (Woodenware Factory) In other words, barrel staves, and the tops of barrels. Shooks were those two, the sections in with the barrel staves and sections for the head of the barrel. I talked with someone by the name of John Gordon, who was born on that same road, a little above there and he said that his father worked at the mill and that at the last of its existence it was a saw mill. And that it burned about 1900. I talked with a Mrs. Fred Gowen across the Highland Lake Road from the Gordon place and she said that at one time, and she's the only one that I have heard say that, at one time there was a paper mill there. It might very well have been so as S. D. Warren Company owned all the water rights on the Mill Brook. And they owned a boarding house or a home, also a home of whoever was managing the mill. Whether they owned the mill itself, I have not yet ascertained, but they perhaps did. I talked with the Henry Gowens, Henry and Isabelle Gowen, people of more my own age. I found that at one time, fertilizer was produced there in that mill. There was a variety of things there that I'd never even heard of before.

The Gowens were married in 1925 and this Isabelle and Henry Gowen where in my class in school and bought the house, but when they bought it, someone else had bought it previously and started to tear it down, got it about half down and decided he might as well keep it and let it stand. Then he found that S. D. Warren wouldn't sell him the land so he left it and the Gowen's bought it and the land. S. D. Warren would sell the land to them. So they own that land now, but the house that stands there is only about half the size of

the original house. Isabelle said that there were two barns, one on either side of this old house. And I found out from the Gordons, that from somewhere a house, barn was removed and set up on the foundation in place for it on the Gordon property, and I would be willing to bet money, it was one of those two barns. They certainly moved things around in those days, didn't they?

My father next came to Westbrook to work in late August of early September of 1881, when the gingham mill, a brick building, was under construction. He did carpenter work on the dye house at the lower side of the Bridge Street Bridge, near the cotton and duck mill. He worked at the gingham mill when it was ready for the roof to be put on, and during the winter he did interior work, interior finish work. The gingham mill failed four or five years later and was taken over by Dana's, who sometime later built a large addition at each end. In the spring of 1883, my father went to Cumberland Mills where at the junction of Main and Cumberland Streets the Warren Block was being built. That winter he did outside construction and sawed the entire roof surface by hand. One winter he worked at the Warren Mill, where just back of the present brick office building he helped erect a building for housing paper machines which was later torn down. In the spring of 1887, he went to work at the S. D. Warren Mill. Until he could find a rent for his wife and small son, he boarded at the Fred Verrill home on Main Street, now the site of the present Pratt Abbott parking lot. In the spring of 1888 he started building a two and one half house for his family on Rochester Street, facing down Lamb. Two or three years later he built a two and a half, a stable with two and a half story shed connected to the house. Under the house he dug a well, fed by a spring. With city water not yet available, we had water pumped to the three stories of the house. I will recall a physical shock when Dad rinsed me off with a two quart dipper full of that cold water as a finale to a bath in a tub in the large iron sink in the pantry.

Dad worked at the Warren Mills from 7 am until 5 pm with an hour out for lunch, seven days a week. And then he worked, walked, worked at home about the place until dark.

WESTBROOK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Society has more than books – lots of displays including old fire engines, pewter made in Westbrook, military uniforms and information, tons of scrapbooks put together by Westbrook people, old machines and gadgets, old pictures and postcards, old clothing featuring a wedding gown and bathing suit, police and fire department collections, history of local businesses with artifacts including old milk bottles, genealogy

resources, local authors, and an extensive collection of school yearbooks and memorabilia. Many things are just waiting here for you to come in and discover them.



Come see us on Tuesday or Saturday mornings between 9 and noon.

Since we haven't been able to hold our monthly Society meetings, we thought you might like to go on line to see the following. They are on the Westbrook Vimeo Page.

Mike Sanphy and Mark Swett give a presentation about two of Westbrook's best known landmarks - McLellan's and The Star Theater. It is fun, informative and also includes some pictures never seen before.

McLellan's and The Star Theater <https://vimeo.com/508100614>

Halidon Road is more than a location off East Bridge Street. It is also a place with an interesting historical significance. Paul St. Cyr gives an inside view of "Halidon," Westbrook's little known single tax colony, as well as his ancestors participation in the movement.

The St. Cyr's of Halidon Colony <https://vimeo.com/486412178>

Diane Dyer gives us a look at Westbrook's own Rudy Vallee as well as some of the many artists, writers, actors, and musicians who have roots in our city.

Rudy Vallee and Westbrook Talents <https://vimeo.com/372905287>

Susan Roberts Norton shares her research into the history of Westbrook's oldest community burial ground.

Saccarappa Cemetery Talk <https://vimeo.com/266744803>

Mike Sanphy delivers a great presentation on the Westbrook of old by using historic photographs and commentary.

Remembering Westbrook of Old <https://vimeo.com/268680096>

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Westbrook and the 1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic

By Mark Swett

The Great Flu Pandemic of 1918 killed approximately 20 to 50 million people worldwide including almost 675,000 people in the United States. As it ravaged its way across the country it left nearly 5,000 Mainers dead within an eight month period. It began in the Spring of 1918 as a milder form taking some lives, but allowing most of those infected to recover. The death rate for

the milder strain was not greater than that of the normal flu. In late September and October the second wave roared in and unleashed its deadly power with 52% of the deaths in Maine occurring in that month. Between September 1918 and May 1919 there were 46,948 cases reported throughout the state.

The transmission of the disease was facilitated by American troops coming home from World War I. Out of the 1,032 Mainers who died during the war, more than half of them died of the virus. Camp Devens, Massachusetts was severely impacted by it, and its location in the Northeast was one of the springboards that allowed the virus to spread to the local states including Maine.

According to reports the first person in Maine to die was Augusta resident William Lawry. He had taken ill while visiting Camp Devens and returned home to recuperate only to die on September 23rd a few days later. If there is a list of Westbrook residents who died from the virus it has not been located. However, there were four people that we know of who were at Camp Devens and passed away there; Carroll Fuller, Alphonse Dame Jr., Joseph Houle, and Harvey Miller who died a few days after becoming infected. He was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery on his 30th birthday. One of the city residents was Kate Kinmond Pinkham who lived on the corner of Pierce and Cumberland Streets. She died on December 22, 1918 at the age of thirty-three leaving behind her husband and three sons. She was buried after a graveside service in the family plot in Woodlawn Cemetery on December 23.

Many of the precautions that we take today because of the COVID-19 Virus are in line with what was done back in 1918; staying a distance from each other, washing hands, and good overall hygiene. Although there is nothing written about the wearing of masks it was done in other cities states. We should not be surprised if it also happened to some degree in Westbrook. Of course there were other preventative measures that one could take if the advertisements that promised to protect the population against the influenza germ were to be believed. One was to snuff Vaseline and Eucalyptol Petroleum Jelly deep into both nostrils. According to the label on the jar it had been "encouraged by the best medical authorities." It was practice at the time for residents to place a white piece of paper with a large red dot on it the window, or on the door to warn others not to enter because someone inside had a contagious disease. Because of the mild wave of influenza in early 1918 there was the disagreement among authorities about which business were considered necessary to stay open. Later in the year, when it turned more deadly, it was easier to make those decisions. Many Churches were closed because parishioners and pastors were too ill to attend. Due to the overcrowding in hospitals those empty buildings were used as pandemic

care centers where the ill were brought and kept while being cared for by nurses and other volunteers.

As the holidays approached stores removed Santa Claus and other Christmas displays from the windows to stop the children from gathering close together to look at them. Westbrook High School was closed for four weeks. When it finally did reopen, new teachers had to be hired to replace several who were lost. It is unknown whether those who were gone left teaching or were victims of the plague. The only way the public kept informed about the disease was by word of mouth and by the Portland newspapers that would publish daily statistics. Each day was a grim reminder of the seriousness of the pandemic.

Westbrook Mayor O.G.K. Robinson wrote about the pandemic in his brief inaugural address to the City Council in January of 1919 -"Our city must share in the present worldwide emergency and individually and unitedly, we must meet the unusual conditions, which call for a loyal heart and an unselfish spirit." The Board of Health summarized the previous year reporting that there was a total of 989 contagious diseases in Westbrook - Diphtheria 2, Typhoid Fever 2, and Influenza 985.

How many people in Westbrook died from the influenza? The report issued to the Mayor and the City Council from the Board of Health stated that out of 985 cases 46 of them resulted in death. The virus attacked the respiratory system and could develop into pneumonia within a few hours and filling the lungs with fluid. The person affected would develop deep blue spots on the skin that was caused by lack of oxygen and slow suffocation. Death would occur within two to three days. It was a terrible way to die. It would be attributed to the influenza, or pneumonia secondary to it on the death certificate. Either way, it was a terrible way to die.

After the influenza had passed, the Westbrook School Department reported guidelines on how to deal with contagious diseases. Students had to be able to show to their teachers that they had been vaccinated. At the time vaccines were available for Diphtheria and Typhoid. Although there was experimentation with a vaccine for the influenza, it was not effective. If a student became sick the Superintendent, or Board of Health, had to be notified, and the classroom had to be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected. The student would not be allowed to return to school until well. The protocol was the same for the teachers.

The 1918 pandemic faded away, but it lived on for a time in a chant that girls recited while playing jump

rope. Perhaps it was heard in our neighborhoods and during school recess. We will never know.

I had a little bird

*And its name was Enza
I opened the window
And in-flew-Enza.*

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President's Message

Hi, all. Spring is almost here and I am looking forward to better weather and hopefully we will get to the point where we will be having regular meetings again. In the meantime, take advantage of the many programs that we have taped and are accessible on line. (See address above in Newsletter) One of the people who did a program for us was Henry Saunders who was the chairman and last living member of the Urban Renewal Authority. He recently passed away. Hope everybody has been able to get the COVID vaccine.

There are still a few 2021 calendars available. We have sold 225 – an amazing achievement, thanks to all of you. In case you haven't seen the calendar, it is based on "Then and Now" featuring pictures of old Westbrook and a brief history on each month.

Thinking of you all at this difficult time,
Mike Sanphy, President

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Treasurer- Tom Clarke **Open Saturday and Tuesday mornings from 9 am to noon.**
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