President’s Message
It doesn’t seem possible that summer is almost gone and fall is fast approaching. When I was young, I always thought things slowed down as you aged, and that time would pass very slowly. Boy, was I wrong! There are so many things to see and do to keep me occupied that it doesn’t seem like I have enough time in the day.

Most of this summer was taken up with plans for the Rudy Vallee Square rededication ceremonies held July 25. Although this was not specifically a Historical Society event, most of the committee members were Society members, and one of the main events of the weekend was the Rudy Vallee exhibit hosted by the Society. If you missed the dedication ceremony, you really missed a piece of Westbrook history.

After the ceremony at Rudy Vallee Square, Eleanor Vallee, her husband Byron Clark, and Rudy’s nephew William Vallee spent a few hours at the Society viewing the display, signing autographs, and having their pictures taken. I have never been as proud of our organization and its members as I was that day. The exhibit and stage looked wonderful and all the members’ enthusiasm in assisting and welcoming everyone made each visitor feel a part of the celebration. Thank you all!

- Donna Cousens Conley

Upcoming Events
Monthly Meeting
Wednesday, September 2, 2009
1:30p

Monthly Meeting
Wednesday, October 7, 2009
1:30p

Monthly Meeting
Wednesday, November 4, 2009
1:30p

Monthly Meeting
Wednesday, December 2, 2009
1:30p

City Rededicates Rudy Vallee Square

Seeking to breathe life into the legacy of its most famous son, the City of Westbrook on July 25 rededicated Rudy Vallee Square to the memory of the late crooner and actor, Hubert “Rudy” Vallee.

Perched atop a truck flatbed parked in the road-blocked intersection of Main and Bridge streets, dignitaries ranging from Rudy Vallee’s widow, Eleanor, to the City of Westbrook’s mayor, Bruce Chuluda, took turns expressing their gratitude for the event, reading proclamations, and unveiling a series of tasteful signs marking the square and a bronze bust carved into Rudy Vallee’s likeness. The ceremony, which occurred in the early afternoon, was just one of the events dedicated to boost appreciation for Vallee’s achievements.

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When I initially joined the Society a couple years ago as a pink-skinned twenty-four-year-old, the then-47-year-old vice president of the association, Suzan Roberts Norton, joked that I had replaced her as the babe of the organization. Alas, her observation had nothing to do with my sex appeal, but everything to do with the Society’s inability to rejuvenate its membership rolls.

To be sure, the Society is not unique among civic associations in its inability to replenish its ranks with younger members. As the Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam demonstrates in his book *Bowling Alone*, television, work and family pressures, and evolving generational norms have all conspired indiscriminately to ensure civic associations of all types are shrinking with each member’s passing.

Nevertheless, the Society can at least attempt to help itself in the vital challenge of attracting younger members by rescheduling its monthly meetings and programs to days and times more amenable to a non-retiree’s lifestyle.

Such a change shouldn’t be viewed as a panacea, but it would at least be a step in the correct direction.

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**Find of the Quarter**

From then-Westbrook School Committee chairman Charles A. Carleton’s contribution to the City of Westbrook’s 1894-1895 annual report:

“There is no doubt that there are boys in the schools who would be benefited by a good sound whipping if administered by a teacher with a firm, steady hand, actuated by a tender heart.”

- John C.L. Morgan

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**Purpose and Principle**

The purposes of this Society are to bring together those people who are interested in the history of Westbrook, Maine, and to collect, discover, and preserve any materials and objects that establish and illustrate the history of the area.

The Society shall make all such materials and objects accessible for viewing or study on the premises. The Society shall arouse interest in the past by opening its meetings to the general public, by marking historic buildings and sites, and by using other media to gain public interest in Westbrook history.

The membership meets regularly for business and entertainment at 1:30p on the first Wednesday of each month, with the exception of July and August.

**Officers**

Donna Cousens Conley, President
Byron Dyer, Vice President
Rowana Walton, Secretary
Nancy Joy Curran, Treasurer

**Directors**

James Burrill, Beverly Marion, Mike Sanphy, and Alwyn Waite

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**Open Hours**

The Westbrook Historical Society’s doors are open to the general public every Saturday and Tuesday mornings, from 9a-12p. Capable volunteer staff is present at those times to help visitors with their interests and their needs.

**Mailing Address**

Westbrook Historical Society
17B Dunn Street
Westbrook, Maine
04092

**E-Mail**

info@westbrookhistoricalsociety.org

**Web site**

www.westbrookhistoricalsociety.org

**Telephone**

(207) 854-5588
Prohibition in the Paper City
A Personal History

(Editor's Note: Before passing away in April 2009, longtime contributor to the Westbrook Historical Society Philip LaViolet jotted down some of his memories from growing up in Westbrook during Prohibition. Below is an excerpt from his brief memoir.)

Homemade beer made from Blue Ribbon Malt (a key ingredient sold legally by grocers for the stated purpose of baked bread) was brewed in ten-gallon crocks, which were stored next to the furnace in the cellar. My dad would “check on the furnace” so often that the crock was usually emptied before he had a chance to bottle the brew.

Even though there were a lot of people like my dad who had homebrew or bathtub gin and wine, my uncle Joe LaViolet was a lucrative bootlegger for four years until he was arrested for the crime and sentenced to serve a six-month term in jail. Before he was caught, though, he would often take his two sons, Paul and Leo, and me to Lawrence, Massachusetts for some fishing. After doing a little fishing along the way, we’d stop at one of Uncle Joe’s relatives (Edmond LaVigne), who would give us boys ice cream and root beer. Only later did we find out that while we were enjoying our treats, Uncle Joe was busy filling a tank in his car full of 100% alcohol. Then we’d drive back to Westbrook, with my uncle using three young boys and their fishing pools as decoys to throw off any suspicious sheriffs or state police.

Uncle Joe had reasons to be cautious, as local law enforcement tried its best to find his hiding place. After unsuccessfully searching for his stash many times (his hideaway was under the garage next to his house, where a secret passageway lead from the secret compartment to a secret door in his cellar), some sheriffs figured my grandmother must have been hiding the alcohol for him. So one day they busted into my grandmother’s cellar and ransacked it. They broke many jars of her preserves and made a mess, but found nothing. I had never seen my grandmother so mad and had never heard her swear foul language before. She had a broom and finally swished them out.

Grammy Georgie, who did not know her son was a bootlegger, soon met with her very good friend and lawyer about the incident. “Georgie,” her lawyer said to her, “the sheriffs will be back Monday and apologize, pay for damages, clean the mess, and place all the preserve jars in place.” Sure enough, the sheriffs went to my grandmother’s house Monday morning and didn’t leave until everything was to her satisfaction and never bothered her again.

My Uncle Joe, an eventual victim of a double-crossing, wasn’t so fortunate.

- Philip LaViolet

Westbrook Streets
Rochester Street

Running perpendicular to Main Street and parallel to Haskell Street, Rochester Street is named for its proximity to the Portland & Rochester Railroad (P&RR), a ribbon of track that connected Portland to Rochester, New Hampshire during the latter half of the nineteenth-century.

Vallee Square Rededication, cont.

Thursday, July 23
Eleanor Vallee and her husband, Byron Clark, visit The Frog and Turtle, a Westbrook restaurant whose chef James Tranchemontagne whips up a meal of their choice and unveils The Rudy Vallee cocktail.

Friday, July 24
The Westbrook Historical Society sponsors a free public screening of Rudy Vallee’s 1942 film The Palm Beach Story in Westbrook’s Riverbank Park.

Saturday, July 25
The Westbrook Historical Society hosts receptions before and after the rededication ceremony, and the Westbrook City Band dedicates a concert to Rudy Vallee by playing marches, Broadway tunes, and ballads.
Bite-Sized Review

American Silk, 1830-1930: Entrepreneurs and Artifacts
by Jacqueline Field
(Texas Tech University Press, 2007)
326 pages

At an age when most people today are looking forward to a leisured existence, sixty-six-year-old James Haskell founded a silk factory in Westbrook.

Haskell, a veteran cotton manufacturer who initially relocated from Massachusetts to Maine in 1858 to snatch the cotton mill owned by the Portland Manufacturing Company in an auction (and subsequently rename it the Westbrook Manufacturing Company), launched the aptly-named Haskell Silk Company in 1874.

And Jacqueline Field’s thorough examination of raw documents, complemented by her deep know-how of the silk industry and her clear writing, enables the reader of American Silk to understand how the Haskell Silk Company functioned from its modest beginnings to its ultimate demise.

Put simply, the book's six-chapter, eighty-page portion devoted to Haskell Silk is a must-read among Westbrook history enthusiasts, especially when you consider the mill’s brick shell has since been refurbished into condominiums and been given the ahistorical moniker, Riverfront Lofts.

- John C.L. Morgan

George Gore
(1857-1933)

Nicknamed Piano Legs because of his ample calves, Westbrook native George Gore played professional baseball for the Chicago White Stockings (now the Chicago Cubs) the New York Giants, and the St. Louis Browns from 1879 to 1892. Besides being the 1880 National League Batting Champion and boasting a .301 lifetime batting average, Gore is one of only two players to record seven stolen bases in a single National League game.
How long have you been a member of the Westbrook Historical Society?
Since either April or May of this year.

How did you get started writing the profiles for the American Journal?
In one of my last semesters at Stonecoast, one of my friends who does a lot of journalism gave a seminar about how to write about what you like and talked about different venues to get things published. I’ve always been interested in historical stuff, especially local history, so I thought the American Journal was the place to look.

How did the Society help you write your profiles?
I got all my information there. I would talk to the women [volunteers], and Ellie Saunders and Diane Dyer each gave me a couple suggestions for who I should write about.

What parts of the Society’s collection have been the most useful when you’ve been writing these profiles?
I think the scrapbooks have been the most helpful. I’ve found a lot of articles in the scrapbooks, and most of the stuff I’ve written has been from old newspaper articles. I don’t think people who don’t do historical research realize just how important newspapers are.

How would you improve the Society, at least from a researcher’s perspective?
Donna [Cousens Conley] has it pretty organized, so it’s pretty easy to find things. But I’m sure there’s just so much that’s not there. I wish people would donate their old scrapbooks, because I know they get thrown away when the older generation dies.

- John C.L. Morgan