

## **GUNN HISTORICAL MUSEUM ON CLEAR PATH TO CONTINUING SUCCESS**

The Trustees of the Gunn Memorial Library and Historical Museum are excited to share what has been happening at the Museum over the past 9 1/2 months.

As many already know, the Gunn Museum is the repository of Washington's history and culture, and as Trustees we remain wholeheartedly committed to conserving and adding to our town's archives and collection of artifacts. These provide a valuable resource not only for history buffs but for all members of our community, and particularly for the 6 local schools.

In late November 2016, the Trustees concluded that the Library and Museum, while having separate missions, should not be separated but rather remain the integrated and complementary institutions they have historically been, a decision that was greeted with enthusiasm by a great many in the community.

Following this decision, the Trustees and Museum Curator Stephen Bartkus embarked on the initial steps required to create a new permanent exhibit on Washington's history to be largely funded by a grant from the State of Connecticut. With the help of key volunteers, Stephen began determining content, drawing upon the Museum's unique archival material and numerous artifacts even as he and others also began gathering new. He is again working in close collaboration with many of those whose donated time and considerable expertise have been responsible for creating and mounting many past award-winning special exhibits at the Museum. And once again, Chris Zaima is designing the plan layout and execution.

Simultaneously, a Trustee oversight committee was formed, headed by President Rod Pleasants and Treasurer Sal Sorce, with participation from colleagues Alan Sandals and Kathy Wenning. Together they are keeping track of progress and overseeing the \$100,000 CT. Good to Great Grant, which was unanimously approved and signed by the Trustees in January 2017. This grant will underwrite the new permanent exhibit, supplemented by a required \$25,000 matching contribution coming from a bequest by a former Museum volunteer.

"Volunteers and staff have been digging deep into the Museum's rich artifact collection, and they're making some amazing discoveries," says Curator Bartkus, adding "I look forward to sharing these interesting Washington items and their stories in the innovative upcoming exhibition." In describing the plan, Chris recently likened it to "...a walk through the pages of Washington's history..." spanning from pre-historic life to the present. The projected exhibit hopes to integrate material from all the 5 villages which comprise our town - Washington, the Depot, New Preston, Marbledale and Woodville, and will include photographs, artifacts, interviews, written and oral histories from the archives, as well as new. It will also feature newly created video interviews and explorations as well as interactive programming.

The intention is to create a growing and dynamic exhibit which will periodically change in focus and add new details and information, as well as expand upon various subjects and aspects of Washington's history. Far from static, the new permanent exhibit will live, breathe and evolve, generating and maintaining on-going interest for both visitors and residents alike. But rest assured, it will not endanger

the continuation of the special rotating exhibits the Museum has so successfully mounted in the past, and adequate space is being reserved for this purpose.

In January of this year, Lisa Breese was hired as the Museum's Operations Manager, reporting directly to Executive Director Jean Chapin. In the Museum's February online newsletter, Lisa wrote, "I am a curious person by nature and am enjoying learning more about Washington's history .... Every day here is a learning experience!" Lisa, who is the mother of a young child, has been hired for 20 hours a week, although Jean struggles to keep her from bringing work home! Her responsibilities include managing building operations and maintenance; producing the Wash Conn Chronicles, to which she has contributed; and scheduling the Museum volunteers, who constitute a dedicated core group of 18. Most are long-serving Museum "veterans," who have been joined by several new. There is also a pool of other volunteers who can be called upon for special events. Lisa says, "It is inspiring to work with volunteers who care so deeply about Washington's history.... [Their] donated time is essential to helping preserve the collection, as well as to bring it to life through programs and exhibits." This group is conducting ongoing research, cataloging and updating records not only on site but also from home and in the field. Without the extensive hours donated by these committed individuals the Museum could not move forward or function as it does. To say their hard work is invaluable is an understatement.

Lisa, with the guidance of Trustee Holly Flor and the support of skilled volunteer Julie King, was also in charge of the 2017 Tea for Two Hundred Fundraiser. All proceeds from this event are shared by the Museum and the Interfaith AIDS Ministry of Greater Danbury. Lisa's further responsibilities include raising community awareness of the Museum, managing and building Friends of the Museum memberships, helping Stephen with the annual Cemetery Tour at Halloween and overseeing the annual Give Local campaign, which this spring raised \$2,675 from 30 donors.

In February 2017, on the occasion of George Washington's birthday, Stephen, Chris, Richard Kleinberg, Ann Quackenbos and others created a carefully curated display in the Georgianna Middlebrook Room featuring select photos from past exhibits. The Washington community was welcomed to a reception with the express purpose of inviting the attendees "...to view and participate in the planning of the ...permanent exhibit...," Curator Bartkus reported in the spring Wash Conn Chronicles. 85 people attended, answering featured questions while enjoying cherry pie, cherries being a prominent crop in Washington's history. Further ideas were also explored and noted.

In March 2017, the Gunn Museum, which had been closed for over a year for collection inventory, was re-opened to the public. The Museum is now open limited hours on Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 11am to 2 pm and at other times by advance appointment. From February 25th through August 1st of this year, 594 people have visited the Museum, 195 specifically to view the interim display mentioned above.

An off-site storage facility in Bantam was then found, a storage lay-out drawn up and a 2 year rental contract signed, allowing the 1st and 2nd floors of the Museum to be cleared for the planning and installation of the new permanent exhibit. The Museum basement and crawl space were completely

emptied, thanks largely to Stephen's hard work, enabling Wright Electric to complete essential electrical upgrades.

Even as the plans for the permanent exhibit proceed, the Gunn Museum's outside educational activities remain robust. From the beginning of 2017 through August, more than 18 programs were hosted in the community. These included History Club meetings both during the day and in the evening, readings from the archives and lectures or programs at or with local schools. A total of 394 people participated in these events, and Museum/community engagement will of course continue.

During the past months, Stephen and other key volunteers have attended an exhibition development workshop hosted by the Connecticut League of History Organizations and have visited 12 permanent or special exhibits at historical societies and museums, in both Connecticut and New York, all in aid of gathering ideas for presentation and fine tuning direction. As a result, the planning and identification of content for the permanent exhibit have gotten off to a running start. As reported in the spring 2017 Wash Conn Chronicles, Museum volunteers have been hard at work behind the scenes, not only inventorying the collection for inclusion in the permanent exhibit or in preparation for off-site storage, but also conducting archival research and, in Stephen's words, "...gathering stories, objects, and photographs of the people, places and events that gave rise to the unique town we know today...."

Stephen has also conducted 7 oral history interviews with 12 Wykeham Rise alumnae and a number of Washington residents, many of whom are volunteers. Newly purchased video equipment has been used to record interviews with Janice Burnham, who showed and discussed her collection of Marbledale memorabilia, and with local historian Michael John Cavallaro. The intention is to create more such video recordings and Ann Quackenbos reports that in addition to her work compiling written source material for inclusion in the exhibit, she's been hard at work identifying "... subjects to interview and videotape in historic locations where appropriate...."

This past April, Curator Bartkus organized a recorded tour of the old quarries, mill sites and buildings in Marbledale, accompanied by historians and neighbors. The visit was videotaped by Richard Kleinberg, who reported that there are still visible "...traces of the marble industry...including marble used in construction of ... [the] sites where the stone was processed." Richard also reports that more recently he made a video of "... an archaeological excavation in the Depot which found traces of pre-historic life... [dating back to] 5-12,000 years ago...." He went on to say, "We'll be incorporating these and videos from all parts of town in the exhibit....," adding that the team also hopes to create others "...relating to the 18th and 19th century mills, the villages and other aspects of life in Washington...." In addition, Richard has been restoring historic photographs from the Museum archive that have never before been printed for exhibition. These will be selected from thousands of images, and many will be printed in a larger format, as has been done for past exhibits.

In June, Chris Zaima presented a preliminary exhibition plan and proposed methods of display to the Trustees, who then offered comments for consideration and incorporation. The Board looks forward to seeing the next version and sharing more complete plans with the community.

The Trustees would like the community to know that we have increased the Gunn Museum's operating budget by approximately 32% over the past 2 years, with Library resources and fundraising efforts contributing 55% of the total. Much of this has and will come from the "Annual Washington Design and Antiques Show to Benefit the Gunn Memorial Library," a fundraiser which is undertaken and currently run solely by the Library. The remaining 45% is to be achieved by revenues from the Tea for Two Hundred fundraiser, Friends of the Museum memberships, the Give Local Campaign and other Museum fundraising initiatives, as well as from donations made specifically for the Museum.

All in all, there's a lot going on at the Gunn Historical Museum! And the new permanent exhibit is proceeding apace to a targeted opening in the third quarter of 2018.

As a volunteer body made up of 9 full-time and 4 part-time residents, the Gunn Trustees are committed to applying our collective experience in finance, management, law and the arts to diligently and responsibly ensure the well-being of both the Library and the Museum. The Board looks forward to engaging and updating the community periodically on what is happening at the Gunn Historical Museum; so it would be helpful if you have concerns and questions that you make them known to us. Visit the Museum; visit the Library; ask questions. We will make every effort to address your issues whenever possible.

Please demonstrate your concern for, and interest in, the Gunn Historical Museum by supporting and participating in the many activities this vital Washington institution offers. Visit the website [www.gunnmuseum.org](http://www.gunnmuseum.org), sign up for the Museum's monthly e-mail newsletters, become a Friend of the Museum by pledging your financial support which comes with a subscription to the semi-annual Wash Conn Chronicles that will then arrive on your doorstep or in your mailbox. It contains all sorts of interesting articles and updates.

Better still, **volunteer** and find out what's happening first hand and how you can help. This is a sure-fire way to keep abreast of what is going on.

The Trustees and Curator Bartkus encourage all Washington residents, both former and present, to come forward with their stories, verified Washington artifacts or anything else they wish to share. Stephen can be contacted at: [curator@gunnhistoricalmuseum.org](mailto:curator@gunnhistoricalmuseum.org).