

ROWAYTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY



EXHIBIT HOURS

Tuesdays 9:30 am – 3 pm

1st Sunday of the month

1 – 3 pm

and by appointment

half shell gift shop

HOURS

Monday - Saturday 11 - 3

and by appointment

177 ROWAYTON AVENUE, ROWAYTON, CT 06853

FALL 2017

BIG PLANS *in* 2018 for the Raymond Boathouse

The Historical Society is embarking on an exciting project to renovate and reinterpret the boathouse and its collections. We intend to include an ecological history of the Five Mile River and its environs which will highlight the flora, fauna and marine life that flourish in our waters as well as the changes that have occurred as a result of our interaction with the environment. The plan is to present a dynamic story of our place in the history, one that will appeal to all ages of the community. No other institution in the City presents this essential storyline, one which everyone should know. We invite our community to support this effort and share stories and photographs of life on the Long Island Sound.

The historic Raymond Boathouse is home to the Society's maritime collection and helps to tell the story of the Five Mile River and the people and the businesses that have flourished here. Before being moved to its current home in Pinkney Park in 1992, it was located



at the Jenkins/Ely Boatyard when it was donated to the RHS by Grove Ely. RHS Board members Frank Raymond, Hank Gloetzner, and Fred Anderson and others spent countless hours turning the old boathouse into a museum highlighting Rowayton's relationship with the Sound. The collection consists of oystering and fishing implements, ship and boat models, photographs and maps of industry and the coastline.

2017 has been another eventful year for the RHS. The *Wish You Were Here* postcard exhibit, the on-line publishing of the first three documentaries on life in Rowayton, the summer cocktail party, and the 7th annual Chili Cook Off were highlights of a range of educational and fun events for all ages. For more news of 2017, please be sure to check out page 6 of our newsletter.

We are actively seeking funding for the Raymond Boathouse project and are grateful for the generous financial support we have already received from the Sixth Taxing District, the Rowayton Civic Association, Fairfield County Bank, Darien Rowayton Bank, and residents.

Our archivist continues to scan and rehouse hundreds of images from Society's rich archive of photographs dating back to the beginning of photography. It's our goal to have the entire collection professionally archived; please consider a donation towards this effort to preserve these photographs for future generations.

Your continued support ensures that we can enrich our community with interesting and relevant programming and events. Become a member and help preserve our shared history. We look forward to seeing you all at the Holiday Open House and Train Show on November 26th!

THE ROWAYTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Updated Website for the RHS

The RHS has a beautiful new interactive website with a clean look and easier access to the RHS' historic collections, programming and events. We are excited to share new images and in-depth histories as well as Oral History videos on life in Rowayton. We hope the new site will serve as a portal to a deeper understanding of our community and its storied past.

Check it out!



Three Documentaries on Life in Rowayton – Now Online

Three short films of long-time residents illustrated with photographs from the RHS Archives premiered on the RHS website in April. The Oral History Committee worked with graduate students at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield to edit the films, entitled *Growing Up in Rowayton*, *Rock Ledge*, and *Growing Up on Bell Island*. The Committee is currently at work on more documentaries about local history.

rowaytonhistoricalsociety.org

A NEW Computer

Thanks to the wonderful generosity of Duncan and Pam Goldie-Morrison, the Society has a new desktop computer. Archiving the RHS collections is central to our mission, and this donation has made this task much more efficient for our archivists. Special thanks as well to Marty Roth, our IT specialist, for setting up and maintaining our systems.



FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES

In the last newsletter, we featured the first of two letters (date unknown) by Felicia Doughty Kingsbury, granddaughter of Mabel Thomas, founder of the Thomas School. Here's the second:

"My grandfather, the Reverend William Harrison Thomas, is said to have acquired the Shore House in 1876 or thereabouts. He was able to purchase it on the income from his pensions. The first part of the property he obtained was two acres which contained the house, barn, and privy.

The privy was just beyond the barn from the Shore House. It held two seats for adults and a small one for children. The excrement went into a wooden tray which could be pulled out and shoveled into a wheelbarrow, (wooden) and then dumped in the cove. No one in those days went swimming, although there is a photograph of my mother at the age of three, teaching me to swim on Graycote beach. She was a famous swimmer and could not stay out of the water.

My grandmother was a very modest woman and when she was going to the privy or "backhouse" as it was called, would say, "I am going out yonder."

There is a harbor chart of 1876 which shows four structures: the Sheffield Isle lighthouse, the Wilson Stone house of Wilson Point, the farmhouse at the head of Wilson Cove, later lived in by the Lynch family, and the Shore House. This was thus labeled as such. Tradition has it that it was brought across the Cove on the ice, by oxen, after having been "flaked." It must have been a very serious winter. Flaking was a process only possible by frame houses, in which a whole side of a house could be separated from another.

In the cellar there was a shallow spring or pool of water. This was very cool and my grandmother would put her preserve in it to cool them off after they had been put in their glass jars. There were in the kitchen, an iron sink with a pump beside it. This pumped water from a well on the way to the barn. The water was thought to be too near the barn for drinking, but could be used, when heated, for washing dishes. In the dining room, there was a fireplace. In those days chimneys were cleaned by a 'Chimney cleaner' who cut a young cedar tree, tied a brick to the end and a rope and pulled it down from the top, upside down. Since then, the chimneys have been enlarged and flue lining added.

[There was] a lane which had once led all the way down to the boathouse. Tradition had it that this lane was used in the nineteenth century by the US government when the lighthouse on Sheffield Island was built prior to 1865. Stone for the lighthouse was obtained from the ledge the other side of the boathouse, now owned by the Alvah Kellogg family.

Somewhat above the Shore House, there is a gazebo which I was able to



Reverend Thomas

obtain from an old estate in South Norwalk for free, that is for the price of having it moved.

The people who lived in the Shorehouse were my grandmother and grandfather Thomas. They had five children. Wee Willie died in infancy. Next came my mother, Sarah Eleanor, then there was my aunt Mabel, to whom I shall always be indebted. The youngest was my darling Uncle Harry whom I used to call "Funny Uncle." He was very kind to me and he was a chemist. While living at the Shore House, he had a chemical laboratory in the little room at the end of the barn which later became my drafting room and office. Uncle Frank was the person for whom my grandfather bought the farm on Highland Avenue because he had T. B. and it was though even then, that being out of doors would help him.

My grandfather Thomas had a sister Margaret, who was a milliner in Brooklyn. She was the most lavish of the family. She had black hair with a few white threads in it. She wore a big bun on top of her head, secured by a large tortoise shell comb which I gave my daughter Jocelyn.

My grandfather was a retired Methodist minister, and having moved about so much and been so important, his time of retirement was a lonely one. He used to sit in a wicker chair by the window of his bedroom, with a big brass spyglass through which he said he could see tea being served on the ships that passed in the Sound.

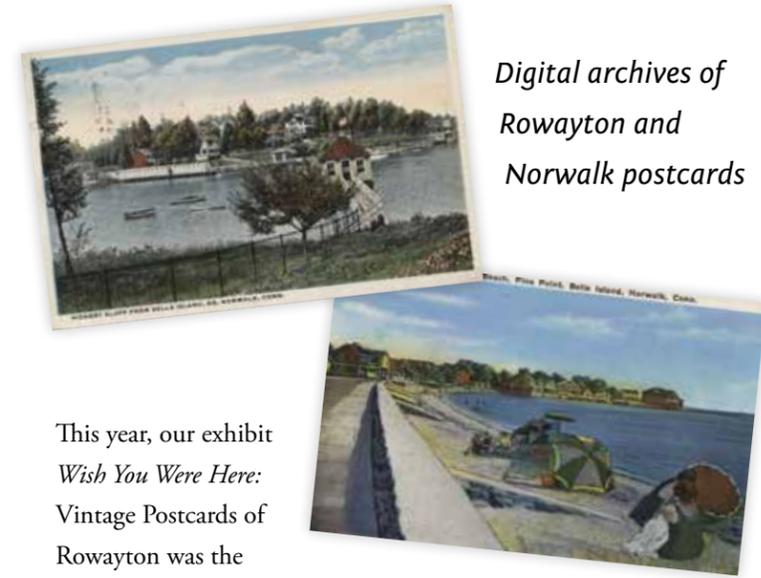
Grandmother Thomas, nee Sarah Jane Place, was a hardworking, modest, meek, little woman. When "resting", she sat in a rocking chair in the kitchen, making beautiful lace handkerchiefs. She always spoke of her husband, as "Mr." Thomas. It was never "William."

She served dinner promptly at 12 noon. The evening meal was called "tea." It consisted of a simple egg dish with some of her preserves for dessert...I called her Gramsey. Gramsey was a tiny little woman, with fine straight white hair, which she wore in a little bun on the top of her head."



Reverend William Thomas and family at a picnic on Wilson Cove

New Additions to the RHS Collection



Digital archives of Rowayton and Norwalk postcards

This year, our exhibit *Wish You Were Here: Vintage Postcards of Rowayton* was the

occasion for the RHS to augment

our archives with a significant number of digital images of vintage postcards from local collectors. We are grateful to them and again to the Goldie-Morrison for their donation of our new computer which made the task of scanning and archiving much easier.

THE Place to Shop to Find the Perfect Gift!

The RHS GiftShop

Looking for something new and different to give as a hostess or birthday present? Stop by the *half shell*, our award-winning gift shop in Pinkney Park, which features *Seaside Delights*, filled with fun and creative gift ideas, Rowayton-wear, fisherman's finds, and plenty of new items perfect for the holidays! The shop is open Tuesday through Saturday from 11 until 3 pm through the holiday season. You can also order by email at seasidedelights@gmail.com and pick up your items at the store.



Gold in the River: The Oyster Business

Mid 1800s – early 1900s

OYSTER CULTIVATION was discovered by Captain Henry Bell of Belle Island (Rowayton) in 1850. By 1860, the cultivation of oysters had become a multimillion-dollar business, and the oyster-rich waters off the Rowayton shoreline drew scores of hopefuls to try their luck here. Many of the homes on Rowayton and Highland Avenues were built by the captains of the prosperous oyster fleets. The streets branching off Rowayton Avenue had such a concentration of residents involved in oystering that it became known as “Oysterman’s Row.”

OYSTER HOUSES lined the shores of the Five Mile River and fleets of oyster sloops moored in the harbor and plied the Long Island Sound as far as Bridgeport and Port Jefferson, LI for prime oyster beds. Oysters were shucked in the factory houses and then shipped in barrels all over the country. The Stevens Oyster Company was the largest in Rowayton and the second largest in the state. It included an oyster-opening plant at 65 Rowayton Avenue. Today, one business remains: the Lobster Co-op, adjacent to the Restaurant at Rowayton Seafood.



Stevens Oyster Company



“Kate C. Stevens”
Steam-powered oyster
boat, used at turn of 19th
century.
Kate Stevens’ father was owner of
the Stevens Oyster Company,
Rowayton Avenue.
This model was made by Lizette
Smith, Kamehameha Island.

In Rowayton alone, at the peak (between 1885 and 1910) there were thirty-five planters and oyster firms of significant size, including Oliver Cook, Craw and L’Hommedieu, Aaron and George Stevens and the Lowndes brothers, and a fleet of about twenty-eight sail and steam powered vessels. Even in a very poor year the Rowayton fleet gathered nearly fifty thousand bushels of oysters, most of which were shipped to New York City.



Oyster Boat Crew — Mary E. Cuff



Oysters piled on deck



STEAM VS SAIL: Captain William Isaac “Ike” Stevens, with the help of his neighbor and brother-in-law Moses B. Hart, built the first steam-powered boat in Rowayton designed specifically for oyster fishing.



Oysterhouse barrels of oysters



“Jobs Sailors Like” by Charles Rosner (1894–1975)



The DeWaters home, 15 Pennoyer Street



Captain John DeWaters and his wife,
Julia Tristram DeWaters (a Dibble cousin)



Oyster scale



Oyster rake



Lantern

Contribute to our new exhibit space at the Raymond Boathouse!

(please use remittance envelope enclosed with this newsletter)



The Rowayton Historical Society is seeking funding to renovate the Frank E. Raymond Boathouse in Pinkney Park. We will host exhibits on local oystering families, hurricanes, ship builders, sailing heroes, Native Americans and maritime disasters and much more.

The space will also feature a permanent exhibit on the ecological history of the Five Mile River, highlighting the flora, fauna and marine life that flourish in our waters.

We invite our community to support this effort and share stories of life on the Long Island Sound.

Info@rowaytonhistoricalsociety.org.

(Above) Mockup of future display on oystering in the renovated Frank E. Raymond Boathouse in Pinkney Park

Highlights of 2017

NEWS FROM THE Pinkney Memorial Garden



The garden has never looked better. It was conceived of in 1996 and has been enjoyed by hundreds of people every year since. It is now one of the most

beautiful spots in Rowayton and is a joy to experience. The RHS manages the garden and pays for its upkeep, and Rowayton Gardeners now tend to it, with Pamela Proctor on site almost daily. Additionally, Kathy and Gary Leeds have re-landscaped the flagpole garden, tend it regularly, and arranged for the Gardeners to install a sprinkler system and lighting on the flagpole. Volunteers are always needed to help keep the garden looking its best. If you would like to join the team, please contact the RHS or Erin Combs at erinbaylis@gmail.com.



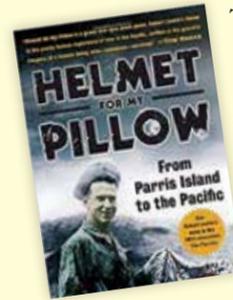
- First prize:** Rowayton Fire Department
- Second prize:** United Church Nursery School
- Third prize:** Lauren Renz's Updawg
- Best Restaurant Chili:** Brendan's 101

Wish You Were Here: Vintage Postcards of Rowayton

Rowayton has always been a holiday destination. Postcards sent home to loved ones from here...cards which advertised our community's charms and served as colorful souvenirs of happy times... have long been prized by collectors. Part of the fun to be had here could be found at Roton Point Amusement Park, one of the preeminent attractions that attracted thousands of visitors each season. Its popularity coincided with the heyday of sending postcards, so the Park featured postcard booths where visitors could buy and send "post-als" to friends and family. The result: a wide array of colorful cards to savor and share.

This exhibit highlighted some of our favorite cards, many taken from the RHS archives and others loaned to the museum for the show. Many thanks to Peter Bondi, Richard Casey, Lisa Wilson Grant, Richard and Abby Moynihan, and the Rowayton Yacht Club at Hickory Bluff for sharing their cards and mementos.

The Rowayton History Book Club



The History Book Club, co-sponsored by the Historical Society and Rowayton Library, continues to meet bi-monthly and has a good-sized group of readers. We hope you will join us.

The next meeting will be held Wednesday, November 29th at 7 pm at the Library and is open to everyone. The title is *Helmet for My Pillow: From Parris Island to the Pacific* by Robert Leckie.

Copies of the book will be available at Rowayton Library. Admission is free and refreshments will be served.

Newly Plaqued Historic Homes

Over the past year, the RHS has issued five historic plaques to the following houses:

ON DIBBLE STREET:
The Elizabeth M. Moore House, c. 1902

ON HARSTROM PLACE:
The Martha Conklin House, 1916

ON THOMES STREET:
The Corvino L. Ogden House, c. 1895

ON WITCH LANE:
The Hoyt-Bouton Cemetery, c. 1780

ON WOODBINE STREET:
The Andrew Elek House, c. 1908

If you think your house may qualify for a plaque, and you would like more information, please email us at info@rowaytonhistoricalsociety.org.

Cub Scouts Visit the Museum



Brookside School Cub Scout Troop #61 had a fun visit to the Maritime Museum and Antique Tool Barn. Of particular interest were the oxen yokes, the one-horse open sleigh, and stories of the spirit of a sailor lost at sea who once lived in the Pinkney House.

MILLS FAMILY REUNION

Of the 12 children born to Smith and Harriet Mills in Rowayton, seven remained here, and their father built them each a home on Highland Avenue. All but one of the homes are still standing and host an historic plaque. Most of the men in the family were oystermen, and one of their daughters, Nena, worked as a schoolteacher here. Another, Catherine Jane Mills Bell, traveled by covered wagon to California with her husband, giving birth to a son en route.

The owners of Harriet and Smith's home on Highland Avenue, now beautifully restored, generously hosted a gathering for the current owners of Mills' family houses.



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Rowayton Historical Society

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

RHS Holiday Bazaar

Saturday, November 25, 12-5pm

Sunday, November 26, 12-7pm

One-stop shopping to find that perfect something for everyone on your list, hand-crafted by local artisans: nautical vintage postcard pillows; unique Rowayton gifts; children's clothing and accessories; jewelry; placemats, napkins, and runners; seaside ornaments; and candles for every room in the house.

Special Preview of the Holiday Train Show

Saturday, November 25, 12-2pm

Enjoy a private preview of everyone's favorite train show. Email info@rowayton-historicalsociety.org for reservations. Refreshments will be served. \$25 per family.

Holiday Open House

Sunday, November 26, 4-6pm



Including Brian Kammerer's amazing model trains and an exhibit of a vintage Rowayton Christmas.

"LIGHT UP ROWAYTON"

After you've been to see the model train show, join your neighbors immediately afterward in Pinkney Park for the annual holiday tree lighting sponsored by the RCA.

January 2018

History Book Club: TBD

Wednesday, January 25 at 7 pm at Rowayton Library. Books will be available to borrow at the Library. Refreshments will be served. General admission \$5; RHS members free.

March 2018

Lecture: *The 1777 Danbury Raid and the Battle of Ridgefield* by Ed Hynes

Sunday, March 25 at 3 pm at the Pinkney House, 177 Rowayton Avenue. Refreshments will be served. General admission \$5; RHS members free.

May 2018

A special trip on a Norwalk oyster sloop followed by a tour of the Bloom Brothers' Oyster Museum. Date TBD.

May - November 2018

Exhibit: Bell Island: *Images and Memories*

AMAZON SHOPPERS: When you order online, make RHS your Smile partner, and Amazon will donate a small percentage of every sale to the museum. Simply enter the Amazon website via www.smile.amazon.com and make the RHS your recipient. Quick and easy, and every little bit helps. THANK YOU!

2018