

# The Old Saybrook Historical Society

CONNECTING THE PAST TO THE FUTURE

June/July 2010

## President's Message

Greetings All. I hope you are enjoying this beautiful summer season. I'm finding every excuse possible to spend more time outside in my gardens. If the thought of a little recreational gardening appeals to you please join our volunteer garden group in the Hart House gardens. The crew has taken on some ambitious projects this season and could use your help. Speaking of gardeners, did you see us in the Memorial Day Parade? Edna Haagensen, one of our most dedicated garden girls, drove her sporty little red convertible which was quite the hit with young and old alike. We were also pleased to have two of our Junior Guides from the Hart House march with us carrying our banner. Many thanks to Edna, Briana Bardos and Julia McKay.

We have two major projects on our plate at the moment. First we are working on the action plan we developed through the strategic planning sessions we finished in the spring. There were many important discoveries and decisions made by the Board during

those sessions. It is a lengthy document and difficult to summarize here. It is sufficient to say times have changed and so must we if we are to continue to grow our membership, increase our volunteer base and audience and to find new sources of funding to support our programs and facilities.

The second and most pressing issue is the need for a structural survey of the Hart House and subsequent repairs. While we are in the earliest stages of getting quotes etc. it will be a very expensive process which we can not afford to ignore. In preparation for this I have begun communications with Rep. Marilyn Guiliano to see if there is help at the state level for this repair work. They have been very responsive to our questions and given us some first steps in order to qualify for assistance. I'll keep you posted as we discover more.

As usual we have lots of things happening over the summer so check out the calendar of events and visit our website for dates and details.

*Randi*

## Report on Treasure Sale

The June 12th House and Garden Treasure sale was a big success thanks to the many volunteers who showed up at 7A.M. to prepare the display tables for the 6 hour event. The weather was on our side until 1PM when the rains came. But by then many of the items had found a new owner.

We received many quality donations of vintage collectibles, furniture, china, glassware, old maps, wooden toys, dolls, plus some custom made items and then there were the books! All topics in hard cover were \$1 and paperbacks just .50 cents.

The "flower's of our garden" photo-note cards & sweet herb sachets made by Sherry Eldridge sold quickly. Hopefully she will make some more of them for the Bushnell Farm Day in August.

The bargains were everywhere but the gardener's \$3 perennial plants were number one on most buyers lists. Also, the lovely urns filled with annual plants, designed by Sheila Graham-Smith's daughter, Sarah, sold quickly as well.

Co-chairman Jim Platt brought an experienced hand to the planning and organizing of the event.



He also found some gentlemen to do the heavy lifting and put up the tents. We had boy scout volunteers and a few students from the Old Saybrook Middle School helping out where needed.

All monies raised will benefit the General William Hart House Colonial Garden. It was fun working together for a good cause. Thank you one and all.

*Linda Kinsella -Keeper*

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## Civil War Encampment

Mark your calendar for July 17th to visit the Hart house lawn where members of the Fourteenth Regiment of the Connecticut Volunteer Infantry will portray the lives of ordinary CT citizens who participated in Company G of the Union army.

The Fourteenth Regiment will set up a typical campsite and demonstrate the skills needed by soldiers at that time.

Historical documents reveal 8 brave lads from Saybrook joined Company G in 1862.

Please contact Linda Kinsella 860-399-6263 if you are interested in helping with this event.



Photo courtesy of Karen Purrone

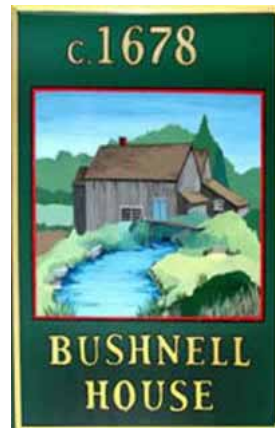
## “A Step Back in Time” at Bushnell Farm

**Come celebrate Saybrook Colony’s 375th anniversary on August 15th**

**FAMILY FUN DAY:**  
 Noon to 4 pm. Activities include colonial games, tours, horse-drawn wagon rides, blacksmith, spinners, weavers, an Indian wigwam campsite, cider making, horse plowing, barn raising, a demonstration of old farm equipment and tools and black powder demonstration. Daytime parking at Old Saybrook High School - shuttle service provided to the Farm.

NO daytime parking will be allowed at the farm. \$10 per person.

**BUFFET DINNER:** 6 pm, appetizers, beer and wine; 7 pm dinner: smoked beef brisket, whole turkeys hearth cooked, cornbread, vegetables, potato salad and dessert. Evening parking



in the pasture behind the farm. **RESERVATIONS LIMITED.** \$60 per person.

The private 22 acre Bushnell Farm is located at 1445 Boston Post Road in Old Saybrook, 1/2 mile past the High School. For ticket information visit: [www.SaybrookHistory.org](http://www.SaybrookHistory.org) or call (860) 395-1635. Make checks payable to: Old Saybrook Historical Society, P.O. Box

4. Old Saybrook, Ct 06475 by August 5 please.

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## “A Step Back in Time” at Hart House

The 2010 exhibit “A Step Back in Time” focuses on the 375th anniversary of the Saybrook Colony and the August 15th Celebration. Visitors will see a display of activities to be held at Bushnell Farm for Family Day. They will also view a high school senior project on the Fort completed by our student volunteer, Chiara Scarpelli,

and art work by Old Saybrook students pertaining to the history of our town.

We will also test your knowledge of the history of the beginning of the Colony. If you can fill out the answer sheet by telling us the significance of each item in our special display as it pertains to this period of time, you will win a prize!

## Old Shad Tales

*When the angel made shad; the devil was mad,  
It seemed such a feast of delight,  
So to ruin the scheme, he jumped into the stream  
And put in the bones out of spite.  
Verse found on Saybrook Point shad house in 1880s*

Each Spring hundreds of thousands of shad leave the ocean to run up the Connecticut and other rivers to return to the site of their birth to spawn. Using up their energy as they go, they move as far and as fast as they can for about 45 days until they slow down in warm water to spawn.

There are major stopping places in Enfield, at the Holyoke Dam in Massachusetts, and some make it as far as Bellows Falls, Vermont, a distance of 175 miles. But their point of entry in Old Saybrook has been a historically rich site for fishermen.

Called by some “the founding fish,” shad have an illustrious history and stories about them have become legendary. One popular story relates how they saved Washington’s army from starvation. In 1777-1778 Washington’s rag-tag volunteers were suffering from cold and hunger in their winter encampments at Valley Forge, outside Philadelphia. As Spring approached thousands of shad filled the nearby Schuylkill River. Washington had the cavalry get tree branches and bushes and ride upstream into the river, noisily beating the water and driving the shad into nets spread across the river. Thousands were gathered in repeated hauls. His army was fed and the surplus was packed into barrels and salted for later use. And, as we all know, the rest of the story of Washington and his men has a happy ending.

Shad have been significant for Saybrook residents too. In colonial days the fish was a very common but lowly food source not to be seen by others on the family dinner table. Even today, some old timers refer to it as “the poor man’s salmon.”

In the 1700s and 1800s shad, salmon and bass were plentiful in the Connecticut River. They were hauled in with seines and salted along the many wharves on North Cove Road. From there they were placed in barrels and shipped to the south, Cuba and the West Indies and elsewhere in exchange for sugar, molasses, rum, and occasionally African slaves.

The crew aboard these small ships that sailed along the coast were often know as “apple tree sailors” because they did not travel far enough off shore to get out of sight of the apple orchards.

The number of shad reached its height in the early 1900s. On some occasions, 2000 – 3000 shad were hauled from the Connecticut River. So many were caught that Saybrook residents joined with ox and horses to pull the seines and then helped pack and salt them.

Fish stories have always been popular and an early Saybrook Selectman told about local residents who did not mind the bones. With long practice, he explained, the shad went in one corner of their mouths and the bones came out the other. Anyone eating shad operated his hands and mouth like a person playing a harmonica.

He told of some of the hired help, after a long winter diet of shad, who “were unable to get their red flannels off until about the Fourth of July because of the bones sticking out of their hide. When cutting hay on the salt meadow, men have been known to go and hide in a haystack when a fish hawk flew over; they felt so much like shad.”

Another early story tells of the dealings of a Saybrook fisherman with his customers who were from Hartford. The shrewd fisherman put pebbles in the fish so they weighed more before shipping them to Hartford. After a while the suspicious city slickers found out and came to confront him.

“Oh, I never before believed the tale,” he said with contrived amazement. “I have so often heard that when a storm is coming up fish swallow pebbles for ballast and such in deep water.” His astonishment impressed the dealers who returned with the pebbles to Hartford.

It became apparent in the early 1900s that the shad and salmon fisheries were important but declining industries. Dr. R. Warren Conant wrote in 1899 that “Long ago the shad and salmon fisheries were large and lucrative—but gradual building of dams in the river and outpouring of factory refuse discouraged this industry and killed the fisheries.”

Recognizing the historic importance, and perhaps with an eye toward local voters, Saybrook Representative George Maynard in April 1945 presented the first shad of the season caught at the mouth of the Connecticut River to Governor Raymond Baldwin.

“I relish the thought that this event may become an annual event,” the Governor is reported saying. “Shad is my favorite fish.”

Not knowing the culinary preferences of succeeding governors, they may have been disappointed, or relieved, that the tradition did not take hold. However, on October 1, 2003, the American shad became the official State Fish of Connecticut.

Today, local fishermen still seek shad but neither fish nor fishermen are found near the numbers of long ago. Each Spring Saybrook markets and restaurants offer this gastronomic delight for about a month and then the season is over.

But, the long history and continuing importance of Saybrook and shad are much like the old song lyrics: love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage... you can’t have one without the other.



The Old Saybrook Historical Society

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## Calendar of Events

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**HART HOUSE SUMMER EXHIBIT:** “A Step Back in Time”, every Sat-Sun 1-4 pm, except July 4 and Aug. 15

**JULY 17** Civil War Encampment, Grounds of the Hart House

**JULY 22** Lecture Chapman Lecture Series continues on Thursday evening, July 22nd, 7PM, Acton Public Library, Old Saybrook, Brenda Milkowsky, Curator of the Bushnell House Farm will present a talk titled Bushnell House History Mysteries.

**AUGUST 15** Saybrook Colony 375th celebration @ Bushnell House, Old Saybrook

## New Members

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Leslie Tryon, Westerly, RI  
Andre LaFerriere, Old Saybrook  
Nina Garrett, Old Saybrook  
Peter & Mary Jane Stanley, Old Saybrook  
Hank & Lucia Kelsey, Old Saybrook

## Garden Wish List

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- ☼ A patron for the new herb garden
- ☼ A picket fence for the front of the Hart House
- ☼ Electricity installed in the garden shed
- ☼ Three new teak garden benches.
- ☼ A large garden cart
- ☼ Four “new” old garden rose bushes
- ☼ Four x-large trash barrels with wheels
- ☼ Person to organize a colonial history student program for the gardens
- ☼ A few more dedicated gardeners to keep the weeds at bay



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