



**Fairfield County Historical Societies Convening 7
Norwalk Historical Society
Wednesday May 9, 2023**

MEETING NOTES

Fifteen members from 12 historical societies met in person at the Mill Hill site of the Norwalk Historical Society, hosted by Diane Jellerette.

David opened by welcoming everyone and noting that it had been 3 years since we had met in person. The first historical societies convening was in 2019 and after initial introductions, the group quickly got to work setting up working groups on membership issues, programming, board issues and more. Unfortunately that work didn't translate well to Zoom. But now that we are meeting again, he thought it time for a re-set and to consider what we wanted to work on as a body.

After quick introductions, we invited members to respond to the prompt that consultant John Cusano had shared with everyone: "Since this network last met in person (on Zoom) in early 2021, please briefly outline (in less than 3 minutes) what you feel have been the most meaningful changes and/or most important things learned at your organization." Both personal and organizational

- For Diane Jellerette (Norwalk) it was growth and increasing involvement in the community - being part of the surge in growth in Norwalk
- Ramin Ganeshram (Westport): Restoration and Renovation: renovated their 1846 cobblestone barn - unique in CT; using it as exhibit space year-round. Includes an "Escape Room" that changes every year. Trying to be more of a regional museum - telling a larger story, using their Westport collections; also interested in what others are considering for the 250th celebration. Also encouraging all societies to work together to collect resources related to enslavement in CT.
- Wendell Livingstone (Rowayton): their boat house maritime museum had opened; also open-end vintage 1910 general store; they were revising their collections policy and streamlining their collection (13:51)

- Nancy Geary (New Canaan): had got a grant to explore whether they should be a “member-supported” organization - and decided they should remain membership-based but should dramatically simplify so now: \$100 family membership; \$500 and \$1000. Just implemented. much easier figuring out who could come to membership events and easier to tie benefits to membership levels. Will determine its success at end of calendar year. David membership theme of EDN. Also new website featuring both a wedding dress exhibit and Forces of Change, an exhibit that took 3 years of research on enslaved people of New Canaan. Working to take both onto the website as virtual exhibits - more than just images. Also capital campaign (partly result of COVID and time to rethink what they wanted to become: turning library into a permanent exhibit on New Canaan and building a new building with a carriage house printshop and the gifted studio of Solon Borglum, founder of Silvermine Group of artists. AKDesignHouse does website and virtual exhibit.
- Samantha (Weston): biggest accomplishment and challenge was opening and restoring Coley House - former farmhouse. From Victorian mish-mash to a 1940s (2017) Curator Betsy Fox - tell the story of 3 generations of Coley Farm in 1940s when Weston really changing. Won 2023 Award of Merit from CLHO.
- Elizabeth Van Tuyl (Bridgeport History Center, BPL) <33:56> special case as special collections in public library where much competition for time and resources. Through COVID no interruption in service. Took advantage of COVID time to process backed-up material and work on collections management as well as to prepare and send material (over 10000 items) to the CT Digital Archive (CTDA). Elizabeth received recognition for the collaboration they did several years ago in collaborating with the Barnum Museum in digitizing Barnum material both institutions had for CTDA (see <https://ctdigitalarchive.org/islandora/search/barnum?type=edismax&cp=110002%3AAdmin001>)
- Peter Lilienthal (Jewish Historical Society of Fairfield County): big issue for him in the second year of his new presidency of JHSFC was to define relevance of their activities to the community and to reach out to the community. When Hebrew Schools called asking if they could do a project with their students (as they couldn't take them to Israel) Peter, long interested in doing inter-generational projects suggested a program in which the students interviewed their grandparents - after 2 years they have recordings of 300 student-grandparent interviews. Now creating a map of where the grandparents came from. Now a demand for more. “From Generation to Generation”. Also they have made a movie out of the photography project “Remembering the Family Store”- so far 2,000 people have viewed. Partly prompted by that they developed research into prominent people in Stamford and developed 8 roll-up exhibits, “It Happened

Here” the first of which was shown at Ferguson Library. Comments on how the Society was integrating itself into the “bigger picture” of the community.

- Amy Allen (Museum of Darien) has been executive director for just over a year, taking over from Maggie McIntire, who during COVID was preoccupied with the Town of Darien’s 200th Anniversary. There was generally a fear of reopening the museum when Amy joined. Needed new computer equipment; needed to fix flooding in the basement (now have a clean, dry basement and a new elevator) and focusing on cleaning up the archives, indexing and digitizing collections. Now searching for a 15-hour assistant director. More support from the Town. All paintings now out on display in 1834 barn.
- Ralph Bloom (Norwalk Public Library). 2 years of research support of what they were doing. COVID - now starting over. First Carnegie Library 120 years old -COVID taught how much public service. Tables with curbside service. . It has changed and looking to see how.
- Linn Hildenbrand (Norwalk Public Library History Room - Archives) COVID - v affected - working from home and working overtime and indexing and digitizing material to post onto their website. Doing more work with the public. Re-discovering what they have.
- Stephanie Kadam (Stratford) - another new 18-months - director. The focus is in re-building. They lost a lot of staff and volunteers during COVID so building up human resources. The Society had been doing a lot of good work in managing the collections - but all on cards, so now working to digitize the records; also implementing a CRM (using Neon). Her announcement that they were actively working with 13 other museums in Stratford met with applause from the group. June is Stratford’s Museum Month.
- Nick (Wilton) Since 2017 Wilton had two co-directors; they left in 2022 - 2 of 4 staff that left in an 8-month period. Feels he’s starting fresh with brand new staff people an aging constituency that disappeared; Nick doing his old job (curator + museum administrator). Ove 20 years moving into decline; trying re-strategize and identity. Recent Award of merit for a deeply researched documentary short film and school program, [Finding the Forgotten](#),” exploring the impact of the practice of slavery in Wilton that delved into the history of 133 enslaved people in Wilton and 120 connected.
- Amrys: CLHO has expanded their memberships to include other CT Collections - including special collections and art collections. Since COVID a lot of stretching and growing.
- Ramin took Nick’s theme of starting fresh to talk about the danger of over-engineering events and the sense in re-thinking and simplifying much of what we do. Perhaps Nick could address this in future.

David noted some themes:

Membership; Getting buildings in order; digitization and the [CT Digital Archive](#); New funding enabling new programs; school tours

School tours - Ramin suggested museums were seen as places where a fuller account of history can be given as teachers are feeling increasing pressure not to say certain things or to discuss certain historical topics.

An opportunity. Tours paid for by parents not the schools often. Westport gives tours of the very successful History of African Americans in Westport - and they address upfront the fact that some people might be upset about what they see and hear. But important to say that and to offer to be around to process it for them.

Nancy Geary encouraged colleagues to seek town funding for, in her experience, they don't interfere (something her predecessor was afraid of). Others commented that it could depend on the town.

John Cusano also noted some themes that emerged -

- Much discussion on enslaved people
- Also on expanding the picture beyond individual towns to give a sense of a regional approach to our history as well as collaborations with other organizations.
- Also bolstering online presence which itself is bringing many changes

Nancy Geary commented that the working groups were had been very good - and gave value to different perspectives. So let's go back to focus: marketing, grantmaking, membership, exhibitions, inclusive history - with quick summary to the whole.

David suggested using the Evaluation Forms to indicate the topics people were most interested in.