

HARWINTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

April 2016

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FRIENDS OF BECKLEY FURNACE

Program: Sunday April 17, 2016 - 2:00 to 4:00 P.M. - Harwinton Library

“WHEN IRON WAS KING” IN NORTHWESTERN CONNECTICUT

PREAMBLE: (From Introduction in *“Echoes of Iron”*)

For either the casual visitor, or even the citizens who have lived in the area for many years, it is extremely difficult to comprehend the fact that the seven towns of Connecticut’s Northwest Corner once harbored a major iron industry. The picturesque villages with their carefully manicured home sites, open fields, stone walls and thickly wooded sections, thoroughly camouflage nearly two hundred years of ravaged virgin forests. During the days “When Iron Was King,” the region’s hills were denuded for charcoal and the land scarred with open pit mines and quarries. Even the air was contaminated by smoke, dust and noxious particles. The serene Northwest Corner, near the end of the present millennium, bears little resemblance to the busy industrial center which once dominated the region.

When massive deposits of iron ore were discovered in the first half of the eighteenth century, the region changed from a wilderness inhabited by Woodland Period Indians to an area of iron production. Iron was a necessity for the early local colonists. Cooking implements were vital, as were tools, hardware, nails, shovels, plows and many other items.

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Historian Roger Plaskett wins Connecticut History Award

The Connecticut League of History Organizations (CLHO) has announced that **Roger P. Plaskett** is the recipient of an Award of Merit for Individual Achievement. The CLHO Award of Merit is a prestigious recognition for achievement in the preservation and interpretation of Connecticut history.

This year, CLHO will confer twelve awards honoring people, projects, exhibits, books, and organizations. The winners represent the best in the field and provide tangible examples of leadership for the future of Connecticut history. Presentation of the awards will be made at a special ceremony during the CLHO Annual Conference in Meriden, CT on Monday, June 6.



Roger Plaskett

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School Field Trip Scheduled

Harwinton second graders will visit the schoolhouse and barn June 1 and 2 for their annual field trip.

**FDR Subject of Program on May 1st
2 to 4 p.m. at the Harwinton Library**

Many historians have long pointed out that Franklin Delano Roosevelt revolutionized American government and is largely responsible for the world we have today. Join Dr. Karl Valois from the University of Connecticut for a presentation of the life and times of the man who guided the American people through two cataclysmic crises -- the Great Depression and World War II.

A Bit of Trivia

The March newsletter asked: The state of Connecticut passed a law concerning a new activity in 1901. What was that activity?

Answer: The first automobile law. Worried about drivers controlling the new horseless carriages, Connecticut passed a law setting the speed limit for automobiles at 12 miles per hour in cities and 15 miles per hour in the countryside. Drivers were also cautioned to slow down, or stop completely, around horses. In 1937, Connecticut became the first state to issue permanent license plates.

April Trivia Question: What is Connecticut's state animal?

UPCOMING EVENTS

April 22 – A banquet to honor John Fredsall, the 2016 recipient of the Harwinton Outstanding Citizen Award, will be held at Fairview Golf Course. Call 860-485-1550 for reservations.

April 7: History Bites "What's in a (Street) Name?" at the Torrington Historical Society, 192 Main St., Torrington. Noon.

April 14: History Bites "Discoveries in an Attic" at The Studio at Flanders Nature Center, 5 Church Hill Rd, Woodbury. Noon.

April 21: History Bites "Artist Ralph Nelson's WPA Murals and More" at Johnson Memorial Hall, Christ Episcopal Church, 21 Main Street, Bethlehem. Noon.

April 28: History Bites "Glimpses of Spring Hill School", Litchfield Historical Society, 7 South St., Litchfield. Noon.

“WHEN IRON WAS KING” IN NORTHWESTERN CONNECTICUT

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Once forges for the production of wrought iron were in operation, the needs of the colonists were gradually met. Drawn by the iron potential, more people came to the Northwest Corner. As a result, iron became the determinant of the economic, social and cultural foundation of these seven towns. While we have been led to believe that the early settlers came to work as farmers, iron was really the catalyst for the growth of the population. Nearly everyone was a farmer; that was a matter of survival. Yet, the Northwest Corner became a region of larger scale agricultural production only as the local iron industry began its inevitable decline.

Following the discovery of rich iron ore in Salisbury, and the primitive development of iron production, the search for ore continued to the north and south along the bordering prehistoric western hills. As a result of the search, iron was found in Sharon and Kent, Connecticut, Amenia, North East and Dover, New York, and Berkshire County in Massachusetts. Soon, the **Salisbury Iron District** had expanded through the tri-state region.

Early in the nineteenth century, Connecticut ranked high in national iron production. Though its rank in production decreased in the latter part of the century, high quality Salisbury iron products for railroads, cannon, tools and hardware were widely sought both nationally and internationally. But, despite the quality and broad marketing campaigns, the local industry was slowly on its way to obsolescence, even while some of the iron works were experiencing their greatest period of production.

This presentation is as much about men as iron. While to the east, Winsted, Colebrook and Collinsville were significant iron making towns, the Northwest Corner iron industry was inextricably linked to like industry in the bordering regions of New York and Massachusetts. Fascinating threads of family names weave their way through the stories of local industry, cementing long term business relationships between forge and furnace owners and managers, and frequently crossing state lines. Family names and place names such as the Livingstons of New York state’s Livingstone Manor; East Canaan’s Forbes and Adam; the Pettees of Mt. Riga in Salisbury; the Hopsons in Kent; Sharon’s Bradley and Landon as well as the Hutchinsons, Benedicts, and Hotchkisses; Horatio Ames and the Holleys, Coffings, Barnums, and Richardsons of Salisbury; Massachusetts’s Algiers and Pomeroy’s; were associated with the iron industry across the political borders. These names often serve as connectors, both determining and illuminating the complex network of relationships between local iron men.

The primary purpose of this presentation is to promote an awareness of the relationship between the land of Connecticut’s Northwest Corner and the intriguing combination of people that came here and changed a veritable wilderness into a region of major industrial production. This is the story of the time **“When Iron Was King.”**

PRESENTERS:

Bio - Ed Kirby:

Ed Kirby is a retired educator whose interest in local and western history, geology and industrial archeology spans many years. As a teacher, athletic coach, administrator and consultant he has worked with students at the elementary, secondary, undergraduate and graduate levels.

In northwestern Connecticut Ed has managed activities for the preservation of historical archival structures including Lime Rock Blast Furnace #2, the Beckley Blast Furnace, the Sharon Valley Lime Kiln and the Sharon Town Clock.

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Ed works as a consultant in education, geology, industrial archaeology and local history. His services include Trustee Emeritus of the *Upper Housatonic Valley Heritage Area, Inc.*, President of *Friends of Beckley Furnace*; Past President and current member of the *Sharon Historical Society Board of Trustees* and several other local and western history organizations.

Ed's primary goal is to focus on little known facets of our local heritage and to challenge others to become involved in researching and teaching the history of the Salisbury Iron District. Ed's presentations and several books reflect his enthusiasm for the history of local landmarks and the fascinating web of connections across the USA. Ed is a native of Sharon, Connecticut where he resides today.

Bio - Dick Paddock:

After retiring from a career spanning more than thirty years designing computers and related electronic equipment, Dick Paddock turned his attention toward a lifelong interest in the industrial and railroad history of the Northwest Corner.

Dick is a Vice President of the Friends of Beckley Furnace in East Canaan which is a nonprofit corporation that works with the State of Connecticut and town of North Canaan to preserve and develop Connecticut's only Industrial Monument: Beckley Furnace. He has written numerous history related articles for The Lakeville Journal, including a series titled "Rail Tales".

Dick is the number one conductor of Tours at Beckley Furnace, serving on site every Saturday from the last week in May through Columbus Day weekend.

He is a member of the Salisbury Historical Society and a Trustee of the Salisbury Association.

Dick lives in the Taconic section of Salisbury.

OUTLINE OF PRESENTATION:

- I. Introduction [Iron Making in NW CT 1735 to 1925]
- II. History (illustrated with pass around 11" x 17" laminated photos)
 - a. location of the Salisbury Iron District
 - b. formation of iron ore
 - c. discovery of iron ore in 1731
 - d. from forges to blast furnaces
 - e. iron men
 - f. pictures and discussion re furnaces and people
- III. Documentary Film – "*Visions Of Iron*"
 - a. Film – 25 minutes
 - b. Questions and discussion
- IV. Refreshment Break – photos available for review
- V. Presentation of materials into and out of a blast furnace
- VI. Demonstration ~ the making of charcoal
- VII. The iron making process
- VIII. Questions and discussion
- IX. Invitation to the Harwinton Historical Society to attend a Beckley Furnace Saturday Tour

2016 HISTORICAL SOCIETY DUES (\$15 PER PERSON) MAY BE SENT TO: TREASURER, P.O. BOX 84, HARWINTON, CT 06791

Harwinton Historian Recipient of Award of Merit

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The Connecticut League of History Organizations presents the Award of Merit to institutions and individuals who demonstrate the highest of professional standards, and who enhance and further the understanding of Connecticut history. The purpose of the Award of Merit program is to recognize the care, thought and effort invested in these contributions and to inspire and encourage others by acknowledging exceptional contributions to state and local history.

Roger P. Plaskett was appointed municipal historian for the town of Harwinton in 2006. He is the third person in the town's history to hold that title, which he says he accepted, in part, because he felt he could advance the historian's position into a more modern environment. His list of accomplishments in the area of historic preservation is long, varied and exceptional. He has expanded and modernized the role of town historian for the benefit of anyone with an interest in Connecticut history.

Since Jan. 1, 2015 alone, there have been 3,454 views at the harwintonhistory.com web site that Roger established and maintains for the public's benefit. People regularly contact the web site for help with research. He has also developed and presented programs on topics related to Harwinton history to young and old – from elementary school students and Scout troops to senior citizens.

When Roger took on the role of town historian in 2006, his goal was to modernize the position and increase its visibility and value. He has accomplished that goal and is constantly setting new goals. He also serves as the historian for the Harwinton Historical Society. He seeks to involve others – especially youth - in tasks related to town history. He is only compensated by the sense of personal achievement he receives from the care, thought and time he invests in the historian's position. In 2002 Roger offered his assistance to former town historian Lloyd Shanley, which sparked an interest in continuing when town officials offered Roger the opportunity to succeed Shanley.

Roger was born in Harwinton in 1945 and today he and his wife, Donna, live in the Plaskett family home that Roger's parents built near the center of town in 1939. In addition to his significant accomplishments in the role of town historian, he has a lengthy resume of volunteer involvement.

In 2013 Roger was the 39th recipient of the Harwinton Outstanding Citizen Award, which honors citizens of the town of Harwinton for their volunteer efforts.

Roger's involvement in organizations that aim to further an understanding and appreciation of local history have included the following: past vice president and a current member and historian of the Harwinton Historical Society, director of the T.A. Hungerford Memorial Library Museum, member of the Harwinton Historic District and Historical Properties Commission. On a more personal level, he is historian for the Barber Family Reunion, a group with roots in Harwinton that has gathered annually for about 140 years.

Other volunteer activities have included being treasurer of the Harwinton Swimming Club

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and past president of the Torrington Little League Instructional Division. He is also a founder and long-time director of the Foothills BMX facility in Torrington. For his efforts to promote youth sports and provide a program that allows youth to learn responsibility and set achievable goals, he received an award from the City of Torrington as well as a national recognition as “Volunteer of the Year” for the National Bicycle League. In 2011 he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from Connecticut’s state BMX Association for his 30 plus years of volunteering within the state. He still announces BMX races and occasionally addresses BMX groups nationally.

State recognition of Plaskett’s volunteer efforts came on July 20, 2003 when the day was declared “Roger Plaskett Day” throughout Connecticut by then Governor John Rowland.

Roger has worked with the now retired state archeologist Nicholas Bellantoni on a few projects. One was an Indian soap stone quarry that was verified as one of the best that the State Archeologist had ever seen. Only a few individuals know its location within Harwinton. Rogers’s quick action in 2014 prevented the parcel of land that it is located on from being given inadvertently to the Lake Harwinton Association.

He has helped digitize most of the old photographs and many scrapbooks for the Harwinton Historical Society and the T.A. Hungerford Memorial Museum and he has contributed many photographs of local buildings and events. He has also helped the Historical Society launch an oral history project. Roger recorded, edited and produced the project’s first oral history DVD.

Additionally, Roger has created and delivered history - related programs that appeal to all ages. He established a Harwinton history web site that has become a popular place for people to begin research or simply further their interest in history.

In 2011 Roger received a special recognition award from the New Canaan Preservation Alliance for his participation in leading efforts to save a home with a Harwinton history from demolition. For the last four years he has been chairman of a committee that worked to reconstruct the historic house in Harwinton.

In October of 2015 Roger organized a Cemetery Walk into Harwinton’s past. This free, nighttime guided tour of Harwinton’s second oldest cemetery was based on a similar program in Washington Depot. The event brought together volunteers of all ages from local organizations including students from Lewis S. Mills High School. It was deemed a huge success and is likely to become a regular event. Roger was even among the actors in the cemetery that night. He proudly portrayed church deacon Cyprian Webster, the first person to be buried in the cemetery.

Most recently Roger has concluded a project to create a “to scale” map and index of South Cemetery, Harwinton’s second oldest burial site. He has donated a copy of the map and index to the town archives as well as the historical society. This is a very significant contribution and will preserve for future generations information that was slowly being lost by time and weather. In future years the sandstone grave markers will become less readable than they are now. The last record of these markers was the 1932 Hale Collection. The map will be of great value to genealogists and researchers. Roger is now photographing every stone and will upload his pictures to the “Find a Grave” web site.