



Derrin House c. 1810

249 West Avon Road



Pine Grove Schoolhouse c. 1865

3 Harris Road



1st Company Horse Guards Barn c. 1880

232 West Avon Road



Schoolhouse No. 3, 8 E. Main Street

Headquarters Avon Historical Society

## The Avon Historical Society Winter Newsletter 2016

Once again it is winter and we Northerners are ready. So it is a great time to catch up on your reading...especially this newsletter! Winter is also a season for reflection, spending time with family and friends, and preparing for what is next as the New Year is upon us.

### Mark your calendar for these upcoming events!

January 4 - February 28 - An exhibit entitled *Hearts and Flowers: Antique Valentine Cards and Postcards from 1900 to 1915* from the collection of Liz Neff, Society Trustee, on display case outside the Local History Room at the Avon Free Public Library (AFPL).

Saturday, February 13 – Nationally renowned Civil War expert and author, Ed Bearss, returns to Avon to present *The Vicksburg Campaign: Grant's Military Masterpiece* at 1:00pm in the Brown Auditorium of Avon Old Farms School, 500 Old Farms Road, Avon. Presented by AOF School, it is open to the public; no snow date.

March through April – An exhibit entitled *ON MY HONOR...A History of Girl Scouting in the Farmington Valley* will be presented outside the Local History Room at the AFPL through a collaboration of former and current Avon Girl Scouts. They will hold *A Celebration of Girl Scouting in the Farmington Valley* on Sunday, March 13 at 2:00pm in the Alsop Community Room. Girl scouts from all over are invited, as is the public, for an afternoon to share songs, stories, games and tour the exhibit. Former scouts are welcome to bring memorabilia. Refreshments will be served.

Saturday, March 5 – A lecture entitled *Avon: from Bedrock to Bedroom Community* will be presented by Robert M. Thorson, Professor of Geology, UCONN at 7:00pm at the Avon Senior and Community Center, 635 West Avon Road. Refreshments will follow.

Saturday, April 30 – *Avon Barn Dinner and Dance* – joint fundraiser with the First Co. Governors' Horse Guards will be held in the evening. Proceeds to benefit both organizations. Full details soon.

Month of May – Exhibit outside the Local History Room of the AFPL on the just completed 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gildo T. Consolini Avon VFW Post 3272. This exhibit coincides with Memorial Day when we remember all those who served our country over the centuries. Special military veteran events will be held at the Library during the month. Watch local media for details.

June through August – An exhibit entitled *One Square in Avon's Heritage Quilt History-The Derrins of West Avon* will be on display outside the Local History room of the Avon Free Public Library. This exhibit will include some genealogy, historic newspaper articles, two authentic Derrin family letters, some photographs, and history of the Derrin homes. This exhibit coincides with the final lecture on June 5.

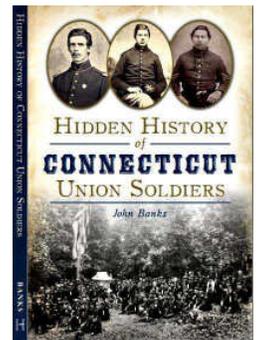
Saturday, June 5 – A lecture entitled *One Square in Avon's Heritage Quilt History* will be presented by Walter Woodward (invited), state historian, at 1:00 p.m. at the Alsop Community Room of the Avon Free Public Library. It will be the culminating lecture in the series (subject to change). Refreshments will follow.

Sunday, June 12 - *Derrin Farmhouse 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Deed Celebration!* We plan to debut a new Visitor's Center in the farmhouse to educate folks about the Derrins, their farm, and their place in Avon's history. Details forthcoming.

## **Society News...**

In November, as part of the "One Square" lecture series, supported in part by the Rotary Club of Avon and Canton, we welcomed local resident Janet Carville who grew up at Woodford Farm on Nod Road, now called "The Pickin Patch." She presented a 60-year old film taken by her family of one summer of tobacco farming there. In December we were treated to a presentation by retired state archaeologist, Nick Bellantoni, who returned over 600 artifacts he dug on one day twenty years ago around the Derrin Farmhouse. A more detailed story on that lecture appears later in this newsletter. Just recently in January, Prof. Kathy Hermes from CT Central State University, presented a student-led project entitled "Digital Farmington" which is now expanded to include Avon. The website highlights historic sites by clicking on the 'Digital Avon' sidebar on [www.digitalfarmington.org](http://www.digitalfarmington.org) The public is welcome to use this blog to add other historic or public interest sites! The Society thanks the Avon Senior and Community Center for co-sponsoring and hosting many of the lectures in this series.

At the request of many of our Civil War historian members, we featured Avon resident and blogger, John Banks, in November who presented his new book, *Hidden History of Connecticut Union Soldiers*. He brought to life the stories of over a dozen men who fought and died bravely during this long battle.



At the request of a local archeologist hired to study the Old Farms Road area for expansion, members of the Society met to encourage him to alert us to any findings during several digs that will be performed in that area this winter. The Town is going to re-direct a part of Old Farms Road which happens to be directly over a part of town once called "Sleepy Hollow" that had dozens of homes. That area is now occupied by Avon Old Farms School which opened 89 years ago.



Eagle Scout, Zach Bortoff, stands by his Avon Center kiosk

Several Eagle Scout projects are underway, or completed, that benefit the mission of the Avon Historical Society. Avon Boy Scout Zachary Bortoff designed and built an informational kiosk about the history of the original Avon Center. It is located on Simsbury Road (Route 10) in front of the Avon Board of Education building near the original 1949 Cupola that used to sit on top of the now demolished Towpath School. Zach worked with the Avon Board of Education and the Avon Historical Society on this project along with members of his Troop. They also built a bench for visitors to use while at the kiosk. The kiosk features information on the Farmington Canal, the railroad, both Towpath Schools, the Avon Congregational Church and more. It is worth a visit next time you are driving north on Route 10 toward Simsbury. Two other boy scouts are working with Len Tolisano on reconstructing horse stalls, in their original locations, in the bottom of the Horse Guard Barn on West Avon Road. Much of the construction material used in this project is repurposed from the roof and temporary wall project over the past few years. We thank the Avon Boy Scouts for their commitment to the history of Town of Avon.

Congratulations to the Avon Free Public Library on a recently awarded Preservation Assistance Grant in the amount of \$5,553 from the National Endowment for the Humanities. This grant will fund a project that will provide a formal preservation assessment of the Marian Hunter Local History Room that is curated jointly by the library and the Avon Historical Society. Grant funds will be used to hire a consultant to assess the condition and storage methods of a collection that consists of books, serials, photographs, postcards, maps, deeds, and other memorabilia related to the history of Avon. The consultant will prepare a formal report with prioritized recommendations for improving the preservation of these important artifacts. In addition to the planned assessment, the grant will enable library staff to attend a workshop on the preservation of paper-based materials. The collection in the Local History Room ranges from the 18<sup>th</sup> century diary of Rev. Rufus Hawley to 19<sup>th</sup> century photos of Avon from the Hadsell's as well as maps and other ephemera. The Society and Library's unique partnership in this collection furthers the mission of both organizations to preserve local history.

History is full of surprises. A recent find inside the c. 1810 Derrin Farmhouse may change the way in which it is interpreted. This past fall while moving some piled up wood in the back room of the house, long thought to be the oldest room, Len Tolisano uncovered a floor board to reveal a 28'

deep, 30" wide well with moving water at the bottom! This well appears to have been dug in an inverted funnel shape with the bottom being the widest part. Thanks to the generosity of the Sewer Department from Simsbury, a video camera was lowered in to the well to photograph its construction and determine its depth. While at the house in December, retired archeologist Nick Bellantoni looked at it and was amazed at the excellent construction. He confirmed that many homes were built over wells so that families could have access to water all year round without worrying about it freezing. And because of the hill behind the house, it is thought that this well is serviced by a gravity-fed spring. While more investigation needs to be done, it is the current thought that this discovery confirms that room as being the oldest in the house. We will continue to report on the well in future publications. But for now, we are on a new discovery that is very exciting!



On Veteran's Day, November 11<sup>th</sup>, local veterans from the Gildo T. Consolini VFW Post #3272 of Avon were paid tribute at Thompson Brook Elementary School (along with the other schools) for their military service. At Thompson Brook, the entire Gallery was adorned with student poetry, hand-drawn cards with words of thanks, and a glass display case of gratitude and memorabilia. In addition, a Library volunteer created a bulletin board in honor of both our local and national veterans. In the center was a photograph from the Avon Veteran's Memorial on the Town Green with the names of those who perished during their service. On either side were words and photographs from Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. In front of the bulletin board, a lovely patriotic table was set up with library books covering various time periods in America's history of the respective military conflicts. At Avon High School, the VFW presented the Town's program. Post Commander Lee Wilson gave a speech as well as the Post Chaplin Tim Healy. In addition, three students read essays in honor of the veterans and students from Roaring Brook School sang two patriotic songs for those assembled. Mr. Gary Mala, School Superintendent, made remarks as did Town Manager, Branden Robertson. Towns across our nation honored their veterans in their own ceremonies that day. Avon certainly gave our own veterans a heartfelt thank you for their service through their words and hard work in creating the moving and lovely displays.

## The History Corner...



### The Little Engine That DID!

This is the story of a historic fire engine pumper truck and the fire departments that knew her. Called 'her' because it seems this gender is assigned even to a piece of mechanical machinery when there is an affinity for it. Our story begins in December 1938 when the Mystic, Connecticut B. F. Hoxie Hose Company #1 purchased a new Mack, Type 80, 750 g.p.m, pumper truck. 'She' was a workhorse for the town of Mystic until early 1946 when the firehouse was ablaze with fire and pushed out of the garage badly burned. The little pumper truck was on a flatbed on its way to the junkyard when, by happenstance, George Alcott of Avon happened upon her and followed the wrecker to the yard. He made an offer of \$1,000 and bought it then and there, inoperable, without even any front seats! Mr. Alcott, then president of the Avon Fire Department in Avon Center, got the pumper back to town and the department purchased it from him for the same amount. By late 1946, through the efforts of many man hours of labor and materials, the pumper was put back in service as Engine #3 and housed in an old Ensign Bickford building. She saw many battles in Avon as well including an effort to save the Alsop's dairy barn on Nod Road pumping water from the Farmington River and ran for seven hours straight!

In 1960, the Avon Fire Department (Center) merged with the Secret Lake Fire Department becoming Company 2 and Engine #3 worked out of their firehouse. The consolidation of Secret Lake Fire Department took place on March 13, 1946 combining seventeen members of the Secret Lake volunteer firefighters with sixteen members of the Cherry Pond Association firefighters. The Secret Lake community was formerly summer cottages located around the lake during the 1920s and 1930s and they were incorporated into a tax district in 1931 that entitled it to public services such as a fire department. Money was raised to build a firehouse which was dedicated on April 14, 1947. The firehouse was constructed by a volunteer workforce. Wooden roof beams which were formerly the grandstands at nearby Cherry Park fairgrounds, were saved and repurposed for the firehouse. This Company, according to the Avon Volunteer Fire Department website ([www.avonfd.org](http://www.avonfd.org)), is the oldest of the four Companies and it serves the western and northern areas of town. According to a history written on the 1938 pumper it was said that "every firefighter who has had the opportunity to work with it [her] seems to hold a special fondness in their heart for its performance."



In 1974, the little pumper truck finally taken out of service after 36 years of giving her all. She sat idle for many years but, in the early 1980s, she was taken out of mothballs and restored once again, this time to be used as a parade/muster piece and resides on West Avon Road. Once, she was used as a wedding limo and has also carried a fallen fireman on his 'final call' to his resting place. To be sure, the old pumper truck is happy to be taken out of the garage to breathe fresh air and show herself off now and again. "To this day, the efforts of all concerned parties, past and present, are still represented by this beautiful, historic piece of fire apparatus." She makes us all proud.

## THE HISTORY CORNER (cont'd)...



### Reflections on Mrs. Heublein's casual dinnerware

If you have ever visited the Heublein Tower, you will recognize the photo at left of the dining room. The tower, built in 1914, was the summer residence of Gilbert F. Heublein who was a wealthy restaurateur and hotelier. During my own visit, I was transfixed by the dinnerware. The table was set for four guests for an informal gathering. The porcelain dinnerware features a pheasant in the center gracefully perching on a branch surrounded by what appears to be softly colored peonies. The rim of the plate has an alternating pattern in cream yellow outlined by dainty gray lines. I finally forced my eyes away from the objects of my gaze. You must understand that I am a confirmed "dish-aholic." When I looked further around the room my eyes then zeroed in on three additional pieces from this dinnerware set....a beautiful oval platter, a small creamer, and a vegetable bowl on display atop an elegant sideboard.



I couldn't wait to get home to my computer to research the pattern. I dug in for an expected long evening of searching the Internet far and wide. Well, to my surprise, I hit on the pattern rather quickly! It was made by the F. Winkle & Co. (Ltd.) of Staffordshire, Whieldon Road, Stoke-on-Trent, England. According to *The Potteries* ([www.thepotteries.org](http://www.thepotteries.org)) website, this shop operated during the years 1890-1931. The pattern is known as 'Pheasant', number 7085. On the reverse, the shop's markings include a circle with the words 'Whieldon Ware', a banner under this with the name of the pattern, and then F. Winkle & Co., England. My research indicated that if 'Ltd.' followed 'Co.', then the piece was made after 1911. Therefore, we know this set predates this.

Then I wondered why Mrs. Heublein, I assume, chose the pheasant pattern as the tableware for her family and casual entertaining. I trolled the Internet for what the symbolism of the pheasant is. I found it is a bird native to China and is revered for its beauty and coloring. In China, the pheasant is a symbol of nobility and often associated with high rank in political office. Another website said the pheasant is a common emblem that was thought to bring good fortune as it represents 'light, virtue, and prosperity'. Now that I understood the symbolism of the dinnerware, I understood why the choice of this pattern was made. The pheasant represented the achievement of social rank and wealth; it represented the Heubleins, or, perhaps Mrs. Heublein just liked the pattern.

I daydreamed about what a ladies luncheon in the tower would have been like. I started to envision this lovely table setting, perhaps with a centerpiece of fresh flowers from the garden, a gentle summertime breeze coming through the ajar windows. I mused about the platter on the table filled with delicate tea sandwiches and strawberries in a bowl. What kind of tea was being served...Oolong or English? I pictured elite ladies of elegance and education around the table admiring their reflections in the gleaming pheasant dinnerware. What conversations did they have around this lovely table? Oh, if plates could only talk!

## SPOTLIGHT ON....



Recently the Society held another 'Great Photo Hunt' where the public was invited to donate historic photographs to the collection archived at the Marian M. Hunter History Room at the Avon Free Public Library. The photograph herein was graciously added to our collection by a private donor. This is an unassuming photograph; a professional portrait of an unadorned woman clearly from 'the olden days'. But two questions must be asked and answered: Who was this woman and what is significant about this photograph? The donor is also a collector of antiquarian books, historic photographs, and other historic items. He is also educated and knowledgeable about these 'treasurers'. In short, he knows what he has in view, whether or not it has intrinsic worth. Such was the case when he obtained this photograph. The woman is Mattie J. Chapin, former resident of Avon. She

lived on Lovely Street with her husband George B. Chapin. Mattie was born in New York in 1864 and appears on Avon census records for 1910, 1920, and 1940. In a historic *Hartford Courant* article, dated August 30, 1914, the Chapin family celebrated their first family reunion at their Lovely Street 'bungalow.' It was such a success, family members decided to continue the reunions annually.

The donation of this photograph adds to the town's collective heritage as another family file is now created in the history room for the Chapin Family. So this answers question number one. Now for question number two. What makes this seemingly ordinary photograph significant is that it was taken by the well-known photographer of his time, H. L. Bundy (Hartford), as you can see on the border. What a wonderful addition to Avon's historical record. Many thanks to the donor for bringing Mattie home where she belongs.

## Pieces of the Past...

We are just over the moon about the archaeological finds made at the Derrin Farmhouse twenty years ago by Mr. Nicholas Bellantoni and local Avon students. On a return visit to Avon the retired State Archaeologist brought with him a box containing 638 artifacts found during a one day dig around the foundation of the farmhouse. Mr. Bellantoni was our guest speaker for the lecture series on Dec. 5<sup>th</sup> that is focusing on the Derrins, their farms, and their neighbors in early Avon. The audience was absolutely transfixed by the representative artifacts Mr. Bellantoni laid out on the table to talk about during his presentation. These included what would today be regarded as rather mundane items. When you think about the items in context with the time period, they tell a story and add more to our collective knowledge about the lives of the Derrins and confirm their socio-economic status. (Photo: Nick Bellantoni speaking with Len Tolisano at Derrin Farmhouse)



One item was a perfume bottle with the name of the perfume company on it, another was a brown bottle that looked like today's beer bottle. It was actually a bottle to hold tea and also had the tea company's name on it. There were also little bits and pieces of things such as pottery/ceramic

fragments reflecting the family's dinnerware, a cup handle, a wine bottle with the stopper still attached, which he explained was a rare find. Then, there were little metal objects such as what appeared to be a little silver bell, a small metal hook perhaps to hold up hosiery, and a coin with a date of 1889. The really exciting artifacts were pieces of quartz and flint which told Mr. Bellantoni that Native Americans were on the Derrin property thousands of years ago!

Along with the recent well discovery inside the farmhouse, these artifacts contribute to the story of the Derrins by actually giving us tangible items owned by them. It gives us pieces of their past and add to their story. We hope you will continue to read the upcoming newsletters to learn what new information is uncovered, and find out more about the Derrins, right along with fellow Society members.

PLEASE NOTE: Next time you are making a purchase on Amazon, please make sure to do so at <https://smile.amazon.com> and choose the Avon Historical Society as your charity of choice. If you do, the Society will receive .5% of your purchase as a donation! This is an easy way to show your support of the Society while shopping online.

For those of you who are fans of Abigail Fieldmouse, please visit the Society's website and click on her picture on the home page and it will take you to her stories which are now featured in a Kid's Newsletter published during the school year.



The Mission of the Avon Historical Society, founded in 1974, is to identify, collect, preserve, utilize, publish, display and promote the history and heritage of Avon.

[www.avonhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.avonhistoricalsociety.org)

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