

THE HARBINGER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WESTPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY WWW.WPTHISTORY.ORG
PO BOX N188, WESTPORT, MA 02790-1203, WESTPORTHISTORY@WESTPORTHISTORY.NET

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

Winter 2013, vol.46, no.1

Letter from the Director

Welcome to 2013! I wish all of our members a healthy and history-filled new year!

I am tremendously grateful to all those who responded to our annual appeal which presented a plea for all members to become involved in the sustainability of our organization. Many of you have answered that call and I am excited to report that our annual appeal was monumentally successful, breaking all records, and exceeding our goal significantly. Greater participation of our members in the appeal has been more than matched by a significant grant of \$100,000 from BayCoast Bank to support our activities especially educational programming. The Society is greatly honored to receive this contribution and welcomes such a locally focused business to Westport.

Over the last few months we have forged ahead at the Handy House, taking care of many of the issues that were identified by our preservation architect, and during this process many interesting discoveries have been made. This issue of the Harbinger contains updates on some of the exciting discoveries at the Handy House. Did you know for example that "ghosts" have been found throughout the house?

This issue also highlights some new information on one of Westport's most enigmatic and fascinating historical figures, Charlotte White. She is just one example of the limitless scope of Westport's history, and the many untold stories that are waiting to be uncovered.

Jenny O'Neill



Window frames have been repaired, sills replaced, old electrical systems removed, and reshingling is progressing around the Handy House.



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These two Westport businesses have underwritten the printing costs of the new Westport Historical Society brochure.



What did archaeologist Tom Mailhot find in the Handy House midden?
All is revealed in this issue...



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The *Harbinger* is published by the Westport Historical Society, a 501(c)(3) non profit organization. Founded in 1964, its mission is to collect, preserve and document the material culture of Westport; and to educate and connect the residents of the area to their heritage through public programs, exhibits, publications and research.

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HANDY HOUSE NEWS 

OPENING DOORWAYS...

HANDY HOUSE GHOSTS



There are ghosts in every part of the Handy House, but not of the supernatural kind. These are ghost marks of previous structures and architectural features, symbols of previous lives and occupants of the house and clues to the evolution of the building. The most interesting and unexpected ghost was discovered in December when the shingles were removed from the North wall as part of the first phase of stabilization.

Beneath the shingles was evidence in the form of marks from a roof line on the sheathing indicating that a small gable roof, a one and a half story structure, had been erected sometime in the 18th century. The addition was roughly centered on the exterior door leading into the 18th century kitchen. The height of the addition gable was several feet below the main structure eaves, and may suggest that the upstairs or loft area was not intended for use as a living space. Other markings from plaster and lath on the sheathing indicated that the first floor of the addition was plastered above with wood wainscot below.

The exposed North wall also revealed that the original vertical oak sheathing, which would have been attached at the sills, at the first floor girt and at the plate, was cut away from the first story along the entire length of the 1760 era house. The oak sheathing was replaced with pine boards, many of which were originally interior decorative partitions called feather boarding, a common interior treatment of early homes in southeastern MA. The reason for this alteration to the entire first floor exterior wall is at present not understood.

The removal of the old shingles was a great opportunity to better understand the evolution of the Handy House structure. WHS personnel and architectural historian Eric Gradoia made measurements and extensively recorded the exposed wall with photographs as well as having lively discussions about the implications of the discoveries.



TREASURES IN THE GROUND!

above: Eric Gradio and students from Roger Williams University examine evidence of an ell behind the shingles.
below: Carol Coutinho assists archaeologist Tom Mailhot with midden excavation.



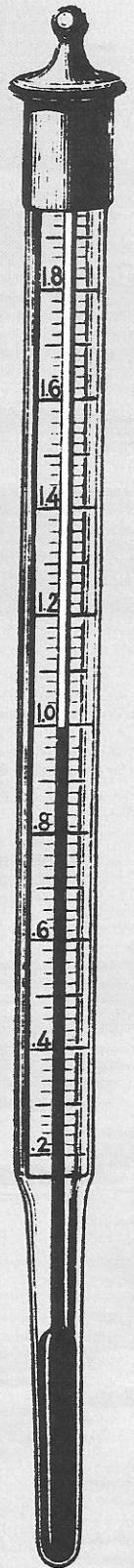
A midden is a term used by archaeologists to describe any kind of feature containing waste products relating to day-to-day human life. Middens are treasure troves for archaeologists! Tom Mailhot identified a midden at the Handy House during his first survey and this summer he returned to the site to excavate the midden. The Handy House midden can be considered a ceramic midden. A total of 2,867 artifacts were recovered from the excavation unit. A wide range of dateable artifacts were recovered including earlier earthenwares like creamware (1762-1820) and pearlware (1775-1835) found in context with later earthenwares such as ironstone (1840-1930), yellowware (1830-1940) and Rockingham (1850-1950). However, of the earthenware recovered, pearlware made up the majority, with 615 pieces recovered. A large amount of glass was also recovered, including vessel glass, table glass, flat glass and lamp/lighting glass. Unusual glass artifacts recovered include a cut glass box, possible small jewelry box, an eyeglass lens, 32 fragments of medicine bottles/possible medicine bottles, 15 shards of milk glass, and 6 glass flakes.

GOAL 1.8 MILLION

**DR. HANDY'S
FUNDRAISING
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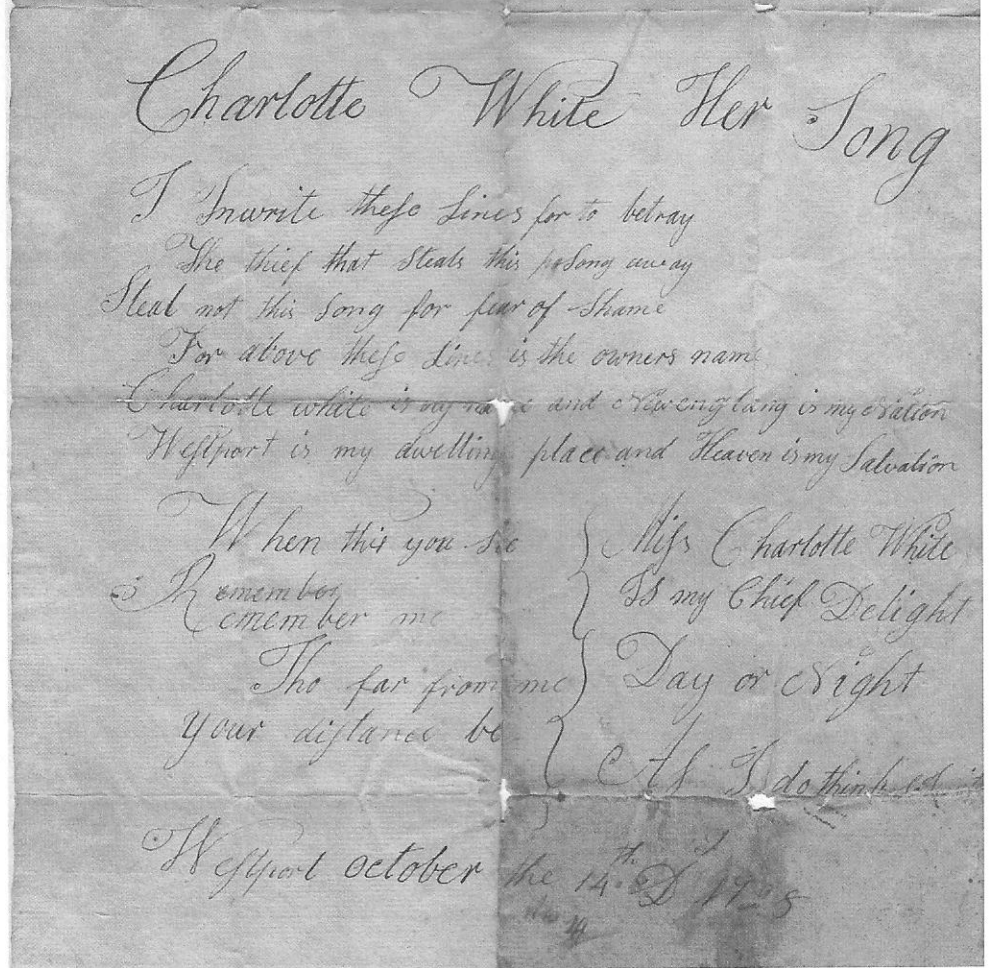


WHO WAS CHARLOTTE WHITE?

We see her name on the street sign in the center of Westport: *Charlotte White Road*. She is mentioned in local history books as a healer, a midwife, a poet. But what do we really know about Charlotte White?

Let's start with her name. The typical pronunciation of the name Charlotte is "Shar-lot" but there is a local oral tradition that it was pronounced "Shar-lot-ee." How did Charlotte herself pronounce her name? The first clue was found a few years ago when the late Bill Wyatt, former president of the Historical Society, was researching the 19th-century account books of the Westport physicians Eli and James Handy. Bill found an entry for "Charlotty White," a phonetic spelling of her name that indicates a three-syllable pronunciation. The second clue was dug up a few months ago by Martha Guy as she combed the town records for information about early poor relief in Westport. Several town records from 1812-1813 refer to her as "Cholata" White, which drops the "r" (as most locals from Massachusetts and Rhode Island do) and flattens the final "e" to "ah," but clearly shows the three-syllable form. Based on this evidence, it is most likely she was called "Sha-lot-ah."

Charlotte White was born in 1774 or 1775, depending on the source. Her mother, Elizabeth White (1730-1827) was Native American—a Wampanoag, most likely from Martha's Vineyard. Her father (whose dates are unknown) was a former slave variously referred to as Zip, Sip, Zilpiah, or Zephriah. He was apparently owned at one time by the Lawton family but worked for (or was sold to) the White family. It is likely that Zip was a slave when working for the



Whites, because he took their name as his own, but that's just a guess. Elizabeth and Zip married in 1765, and had a house on what is now Charlotte White Road. There is no record of any children other than Charlotte, and it appears that Charlotte did not marry; she is listed in one census as a "colored maiden."

In the Historical Society collection is one poem by Charlotte White, but her poetry—at least what we know of it—is not very original. For example, the lines:

*Charlotte White is my name and
New England is my nation.
Westport is my dwelling place and
Heaven is my salvation.*

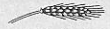
are only a variation of a well-known form:

*Anytown is my dwelling-place
America is my nation
John Smith is my name
And heaven my expectation*

However, if this is not particularly good poetry, it does show that Charlotte was somewhat educated, and had an interest—and some skill—in language.

Charlotte was connected to Westport's well-known mariner, philanthropist, and black rights advocate Paul Cuffe (1759-1817). Like Cuffe, she had a Wampanoag mother and an African father who had been a slave. There are also numerous links between Charlotte and the Wainer family, who were in-laws and business partners of Paul Cuffe.

A recently unearthed newspaper article from the 1940s (donated to the Society by Jim Faria) links Charlotte to another noteworthy Westport native, Perry Davis. Davis (1791-1862) had a hard-luck life. He was badly hurt falling off a roof at age 14. The business he had established in Fall River was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1843, and a later explosion left him badly burned. But he eventually achieved great success as the manufacturer of Perry Davis Pain Killer, one of the best selling patent medicines of the



The following are some highlights of recent acquisitions. We are very grateful to all who have entrusted us with these gifts.

2013.004 DONATED BY CAROLINE WORDELL
Scrapbook.

2013.005 DONATED BY MARTHA PAULL
Manuscript on Paul Cuffe by Sally Loomis, related research documents.

2013.006 DONATED BY LUCY ANN LEPREAU
AND JUDY LEPREAU KELLER
The History of the Rise, Increase and Progress of the Christian People called Quakers, published in 1774. This book contains early Brownell family genealogy.

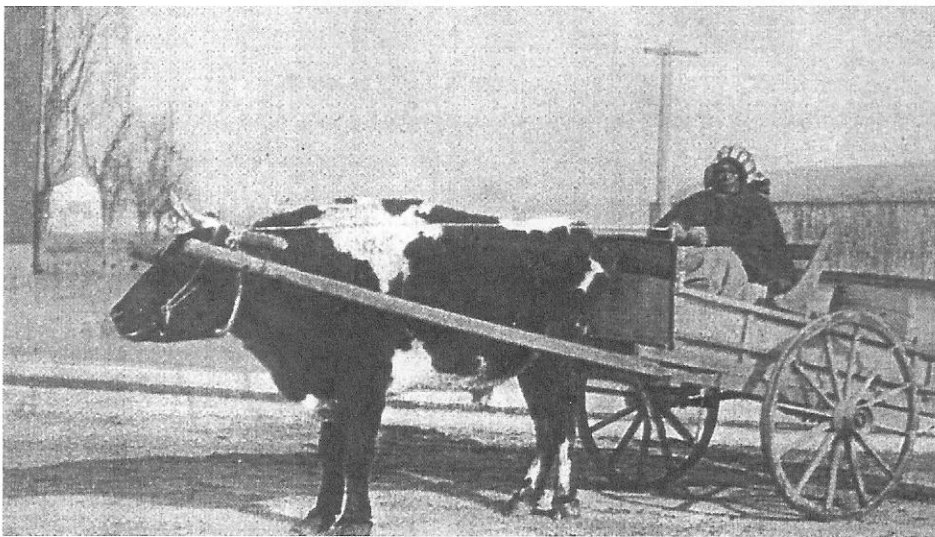
2013.007 DONATED BY RICHARD ROUSE
Discharge papers of Mortimer Hedge, 1863. Mortimer Hedge was a rulemaker at the Gifford Rule Factory in Westport.

2013.008 DONATED BY JIM AND BARBARA FARIA
Newspaper article on Charlotte White, papers relating to Davolls, tax collection documents 1829.

Miss Manchester, known affectionately to many of us as Aunt Lizzie, says Ebenezer Church started the Adamsville store in 1820. Sometime between then and 1839, when her father, Philip, went to work for Ebenezer, Perry Davis became a customer at the store. A customer once asked her father if he remembered Perry Davis. "I sure do," said Mr. Manchester, "the first charge he made is still on the books."

Perry Davis was born in Dartmouth, moved to Westport and in his early life peddled peppermint, other herbs and spices. While on his rounds he met Charlotte White, a half breed Indian who lived on the Charlotte White Road that now leads off Sodom Road. Charlotte was one of the store's best customers; as she had concocted an elixir of New England rum, coloring matter and herbs which she sold to the temperance people of Westport and Adamsville as a medicine. She bought the rum at the store. When Perry Davis tried the first bottle he knew here was his future. He copied it as nearly as possible and into life sprang Perry Davis' Pain Killer.

Davis moved to Fall River and began the manufacture of the elixir. Unfortunately he was burned out in the great fire of 1843, suffering a loss of \$320 with no insurance. It is said he re-



19th century. The success was largely due to his secret formula of vegetable extracts, alcohol, and opium.

In the newspaper article, Elizabeth Manchester of the Manchester Store in Adamsville related a story her father told her of Perry Davis shopping in the store. Charlotte White—"one of the store's best customers"—concocted a mixture of food coloring, herbs and rum "which she sold to the temperance people of Westport and Adamsville as a medicine." (A Temperance pledge meant total abstinence from alcohol, but "medicine" was okay.) Charlotte bought the rum at the Adamsville Store. On his rounds selling peppermint and spices around Westport, Perry Davis met Charlotte White and tried her medicinal brew, and according to Mrs. Manchester, this is where he got the idea for his famous pain-killer.

While researching the history of the Westport Town Farm, Martha Guy discovered that Charlotte White was involved in poor relief before the almshouse was established in 1824. Town financial records reveal that "Cholata White" was paid for keeping Amy Jeffrey in 1812. The following year she received \$34.24 for keeping Jeffrey, plus an additional \$13.43 "to Cholata White's account," presumably for other poor relief. In 1816 Charlotte was reimbursed for keeping Henry Pero, a black child, two weeks and two days old, and also received \$2.86 for making clothes for him. (Henry Pero was later cared for by Mary Wainer, Paul Cuffe's niece.)

In 1818 and 1819, Charlotte took in both Deborah Pero and her young son. In a remarkable entry in the town records for 1818, she was paid for "keeping Nursing and doctoring" Deborah Pero for 14 weeks. The use of the term "doctoring" in the official records gives credence to her reputation as a healer. This isn't just folklore: Charlotte White took in and treated poor or troubled people, before the almshouse was established, and was reimbursed by the town. At least some of the paupers she cared for were people of color. Unfortunately there is nothing in the records about her role as a midwife.

There is a photograph (above) of a woman purported to be Charlotte White, driving an oxcart. As much as we would like it to be her, it is unlikely. Charlotte lived into the age of photography, but the telegraph pole in the background of the photo suggests a date beyond her lifetime.

Charlotte died on June 17, 1861, at the age of 87, of "lung fever" (probably pneumonia). She is buried with her parents in a private cemetery behind 165 Charlotte White Road near the site of their former home. Charlotte White is an intriguing character from 19th century Westport, with connections to Native American and African American history, poor relief, folk medicine, and midwifery. This is what we know about her—certainly not enough—and I hope we can continue to fill out her life story.

Tony Connors



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Note that this list includes donations received Oct 1, 2012 through January 9, 2013. Please notify us of any errors. Donations received prior and after this date will be acknowledged in our Annual Report.

The Westport Historical Society is pleased to announce a most generous donation of \$100,000 from BayCoast Bank. BayCoast Bank joins hundreds of individual donors and foundations in supporting the Society in its ongoing work and in the stewardship of the Handy House and the Bell School House. This donation will open up new possibilities to engage school children and adults in the rewarding and adventurous exploration of local history.

Jenny O'Neill, Executive Director of the Westport Historical Society said "We are thrilled and honored that BayCoast Bank is showing such strong confidence in us and providing support for our future endeavors. We are dedicated to our mission of preserving Westport's unique heritage, celebrating local history and engaging our community in this effort. BayCoast funding will help us to develop our educational programming for the entire community and to forge connections between the past and our lives today."

Nicholas Christ, President and CEO of BayCoast Bank, said, "The Westport Historical Society is an essential component to the preservation of Westport's character and charm. Their work ensures that our community continues to learn from its past, appreciate its cultural heritage, and make informed decisions for the future. We are very pleased to be able to support them in this important preservation project as they help to make this a better community."



The Westport Historical Society is supported by donations from individuals, foundations and businesses who care about preserving the special heritage of Westport. In addition to joining the Historical Society as a member, please consider these other ways you can support our mission:

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