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## Historical Society Co-hosts the *Amistad's* First Visit to Middletown in Two Decades







Bill De Kine

*Photos by Bill De Kine*

The Middlesex County Historical Society, the City of Middletown, and the Office of Arts & Culture co-hosted Middletown *Amistad* Day on Saturday, October 2. Events at Harbor Park included on-ship tours of the *Amistad*, the Middlesex County Historical Society's third annual Middletown Middle Passage and Port Marker Ceremony, and performances by Nia Arts, Tammy Denease, Jordan Watson, and Connecticut State Troubadour Nekita Waller, accompanied by Hartford's Proud Drill, Drum, and Dance Corp.

The schooner *Amistad's* first visit to Middletown since 2001, the event paid honor to and acknowledged the resiliency and determination of the 53 Mende captives from Sierra Leone who were kidnapped and illegally sold into slavery aboard this ship in 1839. During the *Amistad* Uprising, they overtook the Spanish slave-traders who were transporting them and steered the ship from Cuba toward freedom, eventually landing on Long Island. Their 1839 trial at Connecticut's Old State House found those involved in the *Amistad* Uprising not guilty, an early victory for Black and white abolitionists that led to the eventual return of the



captives to their native land. In a rare pre-Civil War legal win for abolitionists, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Connecticut decision in 1841 and ruled that the captives had been illegally enslaved and, therefore, had a natural right to fight for their freedom. Discovering Amistad, the New Haven-based nonprofit that restored and maintains the perfect replica of the Amistad (the original ship is long lost), visited Middletown as part of its 2021 *Amistad* Journey to Freedom educational tour up the Connecticut River.

The Historical Society’s annual Middletown Middle Passage and Port Marker Ceremony brings the history of slavery and enslaved people’s resistance even closer to home, remembering and acknowledging Middletown’s role as a major port in the colonial trans-Atlantic slave trade. The ceremony commemorates the hundreds of enslaved Africans brought to Middletown beginning in 1661, acknowledges the Wangunk Native American original inhabitants of this area, and highlights current racial justice efforts in Middletown. Two hundred enslaved Africans are documented as having arrived in Middletown’s harbor in the 1700s, after surviving the brutal transatlantic voyage known as the Middle Passage. Many more arrived in Middletown from the West Indies.

For further information on this year’s Amistad Day, visit <https://www.middletownct.gov/1036/City-Events>. There you will find a link to watch an edited video of the day’s events, or go directly to: <https://vimeo.com/629191937>. Video produced by Tré Davis.

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## Historical Society’s 35th Annual Antique Car Show is a Success

Perfect autumn weather and a large, enthusiastic crowd greeted the Middlesex County Historical Society’s 35th Annual Antique Car Show and First Fall Harvest Market at Palmer Field in Middletown, on Sunday, October 3. The show was the best-attended in a number of years and all the car owners and spectators pronounced it a well-run and fun show. The successful Harvest Market, organized by Maria Holzberg, attracted vendors from across the state and added a new feature to the classic car show. This year’s featured car was a 1966 Chevrolet Impala SuperSport, which has won over 30 trophies at various shows.









## President's Message

Hello Everyone!

We've had a busy summer and fall at the Historical Society! With the help of your generous donations and some growth in our portfolio, we've been able to invest in some much needed repairs and upgrades to the Mansfield House and the surrounding grounds and garden. This has been largely due to the leadership of Alain Munkittrick, who describes some of the work below. You're cordially invited to come and see it!

The summer also saw a very successful fund-raising Garden Party, thanks to the labor of a host of members led by Maria Holzberg, and the awards ceremony for our 31st annual Sheedy Contest, a joyous event that celebrates budding historians in the third grade across



the city's schools. We've managed to open the House for five hours on Tuesdays and five hours on Wednesdays as well, happily welcoming researchers, students and exhibit visitors.

Fall has brought back more active programming. On October 2, the famous tall ship *Amistad* visited Middletown for the first time in two decades, accompanied by the Middlesex County Historical Society's third annual Middletown Middle Passage and Port Marker Ceremony. The following day, October 3, the popular antique Car Show returned to Palmer Field, this year accompanied by a Harvest Market operated by the Society. And we'll soon be emailing news about our next exhibit, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the St. Sebastian Feast in Middletown, and more upcoming events.

As always, thanks to all of you for your support of the Society.

Richard Adelstein

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**Executive Director's Message**

Dear Members and Friends,

As Thanksgiving fast approaches, I would like to thank the Society's Board of Directors, as well as each one of you, for your support and generosity. Your dedication to the Society and to Middlesex County's rich history carried us through the challenges of the last year and into our more hopeful present and future.

In terms of the near future, please save the dates of the historical society's next two, exciting events:

On Tuesday, December 7, at 6 PM, the 80th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, we will host an online event featuring World War II stories from Middletown.

On Thursday, December 9, we will host a holiday reception from 5:30 to 8 PM at the General Mansfield House, 151 Main Street, Middletown. This will be your first chance to see our new exhibit, "A Century of Devotion: The St. Sebastian Feast in Middletown, 1921-2021." The exhibit features rare photos and objects from the Feast's century-long history in Middletown and more than six-century-long history in Melilli, Sicily, ancestral home to nearly half of Middletown's residents. Special thanks to Bill Corvo, Claudia DeFrance, Frank LoGiudice, Philip J. Pessina, Sam Vinci, and St. Sebastian Church for priceless photos and objects for the exhibit, and to Middletown's Downtown Business District for grant funding. The exhibit will

remain up through at least June 2022 and will include an online version on the historical society's website.

Full details of both upcoming events will be sent by email and posted on our website soon.

I have also been grateful for the chance to see many of you in person again now that we have re-opened the General Mansfield House to visitors. I have had the pleasure of personally welcoming nearly 200 people to the historical society since early June. Some are genealogists who traveled from all over the U.S., and even the world, to research their Middletown ancestors in our Frank F. Starr Genealogy Collection. Some are scholars working on books. Others came to see our exhibits, or just to enjoy our landmark house and gardens, an oasis of grass, herbs, century-old trees, and roses in downtown Middletown.

The return of visitors has also brought new, exciting donations to our rich collection of Middlesex County archives and artifacts. The Holder family, for instance, donated a chair that has been in their family for three centuries, hand-crafted by the Southmayd family of Middletown carpenters in 1715. Sisters visiting from Pennsylvania donated more than 200 letters that their parents wrote to and from Middletown while their father was off fighting in World War II. And MCHS board member Cathy Branch Stebbins donated a horse trough that had been moved from Middletown's Main Street to her property about a century ago, returning a priceless piece of Middletown's 19th-century landscape back to Main Street. (You can read more in her article in this issue of the newsletter).

I hope to see even more of you during our public hours- Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 10 am to 3 pm- or that you will call me at (860) 346-0746 or email me at mchs@wesleyan.edu to make an appointment for a different time. The historical society is here for you, and we have continued to be here since 1901 because of your generosity and support.

Thank you, and a very happy season of Thanksgiving.

Jesse Nasta

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**MCHS Seeks Volunteers for Fall Clean up, Saturday, November 20.**

The Historical Society will hold a fall clean-up day at its grounds and gardens 151 Main Street, Middletown on Saturday, November 20, beginning at 10 am. We will re-schedule in



the event of rain.

If you would like to help, and/or if you would like to be contacted about future building and grounds volunteer opportunities, please contact MCHS vice-president Alain Munkittrick at [munkittrickassociates@gmail.com](mailto:munkittrickassociates@gmail.com) or (860) 301-4088.

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**Amazon Smile: An Easy Way to Help the Historical Society**

If you are shopping from Amazon.com, please consider browsing from smile.amazon.com instead. It is the same products and the same site, but 0.5% of eligible purchases directly benefit the charity of your choice, including the Middlesex County Historical Society.

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**MCHS Completes its Two-Phase Restoration Project on the 1810 General Joseph Mansfield House**





*Restoration contractor Jim Sarbaugh (left) and roofing specialist Joe Kokoszka on the Mansfield House roof discussing chimney restoration strategies.*







*Roofing specialist Joe Kokoszka replaces the cedar shingles on the Mansfield House's entrance porch.*







*The completed entrance porch roof - as good as new.*





*The 1810 cornerstone discovered during the restoration of the Starr Room.*

The MCHS recently completed a two-phase restoration project at the Society's General Joseph Mansfield House, 151 Main Street in Middletown. The Board of Director's Building & Grounds Committee oversaw this work by restoration contractor Jim Sarbaugh of Sarbaugh & Company and his roofing specialist Joe Kokoszka. The work completed included a new roof and siding for the Starr Room, new wood shingles for the Main Street entrance porch, relining of the House's built-in gutters, chimney repointing and repairs, restoration of historic wood soffits, new door and gate locks, and new exterior lighting. Natureworks also planted eight new holly bushes in the front yard. The work, reviewed and approved by the State Historic Preservation Office, was funded by gains in the Society's investment funds and other donations from members.



The restoration project represents the Board’s commitment to the long term preservation of the Society’s “most important collection object” - the Mansfield House & Grounds, which also houses and protects all other valuable collections relating to Middletown and the region’s history. Future work planned includes additional roofing, restoration and painting of windows, and other improvements to our beautiful grounds. Stay tuned for more information!

During the restoration of the Starr Room we discovered a remarkable vestige - a brownstone block inscribed “1810.” It is very possible that this was the original House’s cornerstone, relocated to the foundation of the conservatory addition (now the Starr Room) when it was constructed in the late 19th century. This led Board Directors Alain Munkittrick and Deborah Shapiro to review the original land records and newspaper accounts. As a result, they are in the process of rewriting the early history of the House! It now appears that the original House was constructed by Robert Watkinson, who kept a dry goods store in the northeast parlor. The Watkinson family played an important role in the early industrial development of Middletown and Hartford. More details will follow when the full story can be finally told!

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**Ca. 1870s Brownstone Horse Trough Returns to Main Street**

*Photos and article provided by Cathy Branch Stebbins with assistance from Jesse Nasta, Deborah Shapiro, and Krishna Winston.*







This story begins with Middletown's original "free-cycler" ...Linus Baldwin....

Linus Baldwin (1878-1962) was a local builder and farmer. He is a bit legendary in Middletown because he was the contractor who cut the original Farm Hill School in half and moved the two halves to different locations, turning them into homes. One house is now located at 16 Newtown Street. The other is at the corner of Newtown and Carll Road. Re-utilizing an old school building and turning it into homes is the perfect example of Linus Baldwin's recycling sensibility and possibly a reflection of his thrifty mindset.

We believe the horse trough was originally placed on Main Street in the 1860s or 1870s and removed in the 1920's, possibly as part of a downtown improvement effort to better accommodate automobiles. Our Society's Executive Director Jesse Nasta found two photographs of a similar horse trough, its sister, sitting in front of the old Customs House (later the Post Office), on the southwest corner of Main and Court streets. We suspect that there was more than one of these horse troughs located on Main Street.

It is known that other communities installed animal watering basins on busy thoroughfares during this time period out of concern for the well-being of animals; the National Humane Alliance made it their mission to donate animal watering fountains to cities for free. Cats,

dogs, horses and probably also humans all benefitted, but particularly horses, which were an integral part of the transportation system of the day.

Our trough was custom-carved for its location, with a round bowl and a square pedestal base; a half-moon cut-out on the side sat flush to a hand pump. The basin was intended to slowly drain and fill only temporarily in order to deliver fresh and clean water as needed.

Known for his team of oxen and reputation for never turning his back on any possibly useful thing, Linus hauled away the horse trough, and likely huge, thick slabs of bluestone, which were probably Main Street’s original sidewalks during the renovation, and re-utilized them at his home in South Farms. The huge hunks of bluestone became Linus’ front patio, and the old horse trough was re-homed behind his barn on the corner of Clover Street and Farm Hill Road.

And there the horse trough sat for another 100 years....It developed a patina of at least four varieties of lichen, adding colors of evergreen, copper and aqua to the original brownstone. In the 1960s, house resident and former Wesleyan Theater Department chair, Professor Ralph Pendleton, had an artist friend retrofit a copper and beach stone waterfall sculpture inside the trough; another reincarnation of the object.

MCHS board member Cathy Branch Stebbins inherited the Linus Baldwin House and the horse trough from her dear friend and former owner of 414 Farm Hill Road, Claudea Clow, in 2010. When Cathy sold the property in July 2021, she donated the trough to the Middlesex County Historical Society in Claudea’s memory and arranged for it to be relocated to the Society’s backyard.

It was a glorious afternoon when the horse trough traveled from Farm Hill Road back to Main Street on August 26, 2021. Robert Gallitto, owner of Gallitto Excavating, LCC and his staff donated their time, effort and equipment to move this very heavy object. Society board members Krishna Winston and Alain Munkittrick greeted the moving crew in the backyard of the Society at 151 Main Street.

The horse trough has once again been repurposed—it is now an acquisition in the collection of the Historical Society. It will eventually become part of a self-guided walking tour of several historic architectural objects that were acquired or donated to the Society and now reside on the Society’s grounds.

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**Historical Structure Rehabilitation Tax Abatement for Middletown**



Last April Middletown’s Common Council approved a new tax ordinance that incentivizes Middletown building owners to restore their properties according to historic preservation guidelines. The “Historical Structure Rehabilitation Tax Abatement” ordinance, which offers owners of historic structures tax abatements in exchange for their commitment to preserve and restore these buildings, is a very significant development - almost unique in the state - and may have important consequences for Middletown’s future if people take advantage of the new ordinance.

Owners of an “historic property” in a defined historical district, listed on the National or State Register of Historic Places, or otherwise designated as a “property of local significance” by the City in consultation with the Middlesex County Historical Society or the Greater Middletown Preservation Trust, may qualify for future tax abatements. The owner must demonstrate that a tax burden threatens the continued existence of a structure or a remodeling that could “destroy its historical or architectural value.” The Common Council now has the authority to grant that owner a whole or partial tax abatement for a period of up to ten years. In exchange, the owner agrees to spend a minimum of \$15,000 to rehabilitate the building (exterior or interior) in a way that “preserves the historic building fabric and/or character-defining features of the Historic Property.”

The MCHS is proud of its role in working with the City to support the passing of this ordinance. If you need more information, please visit this City website: <https://www.middletownct.gov/1267/Historical-Structure-Rehabilitation-Tax-> Or call 860-638-4840.

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**MCHS Represents Middlesex County in Statewide Historic Preservation Working Group**

The Middlesex County Historical Society was asked by the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development to nominate a representative to participate in the development of recommendations to the State Legislature for historic preservation funding. The Legislature passed Special Act No. 21-13 “An Act Concerning a Working Group Regarding the Protection and Preservation of Historic Properties,” charging the DECD to report by February 1, 2022 with a “plan for supporting and facilitating efforts by municipalities, historical societies and other nonprofit entities...to preserve buildings,

structures, objects, sites and landmarks listed on the National Register of Historic Places or designated by a municipality as historically significant.”

The working group consists of one representative from one historical society in each of the state’s seven counties, and representatives from the Connecticut Economic Resource Center, the State Historic Preservation Office, Preservation Connecticut, and the Connecticut League of History Organizations. Alain Munkittrick, Vice-President of the MCHS Board, was accepted by the president pro tempore of the Senate to represent Middlesex County. (Amrys Williams, a former member of the MCHS Board, will represent the Connecticut League of History Organizations).

The goal of this working group, which has been meeting bi-monthly, will be to recommend to the General Assembly means and methods for enhancing preservation tools that can be administered at the local level and, significantly, propose a framework for a statewide revolving fund and/or grant program that will facilitate the acquisition of buildings with the intent to resell to qualified buyers who are able to “preserve, restore and adaptively reuse” these buildings.

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**The 31st Annual William E. Sheedy Memorial History Contest**

The Middlesex County Historical Society congratulates all students who submitted family history essays to our 31st annual William E. Sheedy Memorial History Contest. Open to all third-grade students in Middletown public and private schools, the essay contest is intended to promote each student’s awareness of their family history.

The 2021 contest winners:

- Charles Busath, Farm Hill School, Teacher - Mrs. Kent
- Louis Corvo, Saint John Paul II School, Teacher - Mrs. Dzimian
- Brigid Drake, Macdonough School, Teacher - Mrs. Lata
- Charlotte Farrell, Farm Hill School, Teacher - Mrs. Kent
- Sage Fuller, Farm Hill School, Teacher - Ms. James
- Ezra Holmes, Macdonough School, Teacher - Mrs. Lata
- Olivia Lane, Farm Hill School, Teacher - Mrs. Kent
- William Lane, Farm Hill School, Teacher - Mrs. Kent
- Remington Manning, Farm Hill School, Teacher - Mrs. Kent



Levente Pek, Farm Hill School, Teacher - Mrs. Kent

Robert Schulenberg, Farm Hill School, Teacher - Mrs. Tapp/Mrs. Andreucci



## Stay Connected

Please follow us on facebook and check back for updates there, too.

Find us on Instagram by searching for "Middlesex County Historical" or go to:

[https://www.instagram.com/middlesex\\_co\\_historical/](https://www.instagram.com/middlesex_co_historical/)

Please follow us and check back for updates.



**Visit Our Website**



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