



The Castle Chronicle

Vol. 7 Issue 1

Letter from the President

By John Dower

Hello Friends of the Cocumscussoc Association,



Excitement is in the air as we embark on our 75th year of sharing the history of Smith's Castle and Cocumscussoc with people from near and far. It seems like we were just enjoying Christmas at the Castle but in less than a month, it will be the first of our four special events of the year, Opening Day. Another sign that the season is underway is that our school tours kicked off last week under the direction of the new Youth Education Chairman, John Brinz. More school tours are booked in the coming weeks.

Past president and Chairman of Adult Education, Bob Geake, is working hard to assemble another stellar lineup of presentations for Lectures on the Lawn and Breakfast Talks. Marilyn Harris's ever-popular Teas will total five this year, with an added Mother's Day Tea to be held on Saturday, May 13th. The complete list of all the Adult Education events is being finalized and should be available on our website within the next week or two.



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In our continuing efforts to tell a more inclusive history, we will be hosting a day-long summit on slavery on October 14th entitled, "Anchored in Rhode Island: The Slave Trade and Reckoning with Our Past." Nine leading experts on slavery in Rhode Island, including historians from Smith's Castle, will speak at the event. In addition to the enslaved narrative we currently present to college groups visiting the Castle, we will also offer the same "slavery-focused tour" to the general public on specific days this tour season.

We are hopeful that our grant request from the Champlin Foundation will be approved and work on our chimney restoration will begin by the start of Summer. In the meantime, volunteers have begun working on repairs and maintenance inside the Castle, including refinishing the floors and doing some painting. Windows and Cleaning Day will be on April 15th at 9:00 AM, and we would love to have you join us!

Finally, we are working on events to commemorate our 75th Anniversary. Please mark your calendars for Friday, September 29th, which will be our dinner celebration. More information to follow. Also, docents and members will be marching in Wickford's Memorial Day Parade on May 29th. It would be terrific to have a good turnout as we carry a banner with our 75th Anniversary logo for everyone to see.

I look forward to seeing everyone during what will surely be another fantastic season at the Castle.



Our 75th Season

by Marilyn Harris

Seventy-five years ago, on August 9, 1948, thirty men and women came together to form the Cocumscussoc Association for the purpose of saving the then almost 300 year old Smith's Castle from demolition. The individuals who came to the Castle's rescue were well known in the community; many of them were, in fact, descendants of the original Rhode Island families. They included some of the twentieth century's best Rhode Island historians, architects, community leaders and antiquarians.

Under the leadership of the first Association President, Norman Smith, they resolved to:

acquire by purchase the property and to maintain and preserve it as a historical monument, to open it to public inspection and establish and maintain it for the public education, benefit and use of the [community] . . .

They had their work cut out for them. The house and grounds at Cocumscussoc had been continuously occupied and well maintained as a residence until 1936, but thirteen years of neglect had caused both the house and the grounds to suffer. After raising sufficient funds to purchase the property within a year, substantial architectural work was required to not only stabilize the structure but to return the building to its earlier appearance. As soon as possible, the house was opened for public use as a meeting place for local historical groups and schools and for public events on the grounds.

Over the next 75 years, subsequent Association Presidents and hundreds of devoted volunteers added their own visions for the use of the property to interpret three important periods of early Rhode Island history: the Pre-Colonial (Narragansett) Period, Trading Post Period, and the Plantation Era. Today, over 30 docents and numerous other volunteers of all ages welcome visitors from New England, the U.S. and even some foreign countries.

Please visit our website at www.smithscastle.org to view details about the many activities we have planned during this special year. Regular tours start in May and run to mid-October. Public events include Opening Day (May 6th), Strawberry Festival (June 24th), Harvest Fest (September 23rd), and Christmas at the Castle (December 2nd & 3rd). Numerous Lectures on the Lawn and Breakfast Talks cover topics of historical interest. Monthly teas with a twist of history are scheduled for May-September. If you've never been to the Castle or want to revisit us, there are many opportunities to choose from.

Spring Events Jump Start Season



Our season begins early with the kick-off of our Breakfast Talks on Saturday, **April 22nd at 9:30 a.m.** when our own Cocumscussoc historian **Marilyn Harris** relates the stories of early docents and trustees of Smith's Castle. A special **Mother's Day Tea** will be held on Saturday, **May 13th at 4:30 p.m.** with a performance of Mother's Day tunes from the days of radio and dance halls from **Mark Burnham & Co.** Our evening lecture series begins the season on **May 18th at 6:00 p.m.** with a talk from **Bob Geake** entitled "**In Their Master's Stead**" concerning patriots of color who served in place of others who were "called up" for enlistment during the American Revolution.

North Kingstown historian **G. Timothy Cranston** returns to Smith's Castle to read from and discuss his latest book "**Women of Wickford**" on **Saturday, May 27th at 9:30 a.m.** Tim is a fine speaker, so be sure to come to this Breakfast Talk early for a bite to eat and a good seat.

Our next **Breakfast Talk on June 10th**, brings the distinguished civic leader, historian, and advocate **Keith Stokes** to the Castle with his presentation of **18th and 19th century black entrepreneurs** who achieved success despite the prejudices that remained ingrained in business and civic leaders so long after emancipation.



Would You Like to Become a Docent? By Catherine Delorme

Spring is the time for new beginnings. Are you retired, an empty nester, new to the area, returning to the area or here forever? Do you like history or wish to learn more about the historical importance of Smith's Castle? Young or young at heart, all ages are welcome to participate at Smith's Castle. Our docent program may be the place for you.

A docent can be anyone who likes history and wants to share that history with others. We also have a vibrant junior docent program lead by Marilyn Harris and a couple of dedicated moms.

Our docents and greeters interpret the history that has taken place on this site since the mid 1600s. We currently have 24 returning docents and docent greeters for the 2023 season. They welcome our guests and share the history of Smith's Castle. We give tours during the weekends starting in May during the season through October. As the summer progresses, we also add in Thursdays and Fridays for tours. You are never alone. We schedule 2 docents to give tours and a docent greeter to welcome our visitors on every shift. Some docents also take part in specialized tours for local schools and colleges/universities.

A class for new docents is beginning April 1st and it will be held on three subsequent Saturdays (15th, 22nd and 29th) in 2-hour sessions. If this doesn't work for you, we also have a few docents who have started mid-season in the past and received individual instruction. Our docent training includes the history of the area on which Smith's Castle sits through three eras – the Native American era, the early colonial era, and the Plantation era. We strive to bring that history alive for our visitors. Our docents have an extensive training manual, handy cue cards and each docent trainee is paired with an experienced docent mentor whom they shadow until they feel ready to give a tour on their own. We continue to learn with mini talks at our docent meetings and there are lots of adult education speakers throughout the season.

Most of our docents choose to dress in period attire. We have a small closet of garments to loan out and many docents make their own outfits or choose to purchase ready-made items. When you shadow you will wear your period attire. Your mentor always gives you an opportunity to participate in a tour as much or as little as you feel comfortable doing. As you shadow, you begin to see how each individual docent chooses to portray the history. No two docents use the same approach. We also try to give the tour that our guests are looking for as they usually give us hints on what they want.

As an organization the Cocumscussoc Association has protected this house and property and told the stories of its residents for the past 75 years. As part of our 75th anniversary celebration a group of our docents recently posed at our front door. *

This is a fun group who enjoy each other's company and who are delighted to welcome new members. We would love to have you join us.



Some docent fun: left, the Court of Tryalls last Opening Day, Center, the junior docents who helped our events last year, and right, the wedding re-enactment for Christmas at the Castle 2022.



Hands on Preservation Underway

by Bob Geake

Last winter as we were cleaning up from Christmas at the Castle, several volunteers noted a number of aesthetic problems that needed attention sooner than later. A survey of the interior was taken, the problems listed, and the Site Committee invited our liaison with the Rhode Island Historic Preservation Commission to take a walking tour of the Castle, and give her recommendations.

Virginia Hesse visited the Castle in early spring and viewed the evidence of various problems listed-peeling ceilings in two of the rooms, floors in several areas badly in need of refinishing, shutters whose paint was crackled from the sunlight, and areas where grit and grime had filled the spaces between floorboards.

The good news is that most of the work to restore these areas can be done by volunteers. A group working with the Site Committee has already begun restoring floors in the dining room, the colonial kitchen, and the entry area at the front door so that these will be ready by Opening Day. Other projects will include painting ceilings in the Buttery and Updike chamber, and painting the outside ramp to the meeting room entrance.

Other noted areas of concern, such as window repair and floorboard replacement will be addressed with professional contractors in the coming weeks.

Site Committee co-chairs Susan Danforth and Denise Boule, along with volunteers Paul Casey, John Dower, and Bob Geake would welcome any additional help for these projects. Call the Castle and leave a message to volunteer.

Chimney Restoration Awaiting OK from Champlin Foundation



The Cocumscussoc association is currently waiting approval of the grant proposal for restoration of the Castle Chimney during the coming season. The Chimney had been struck by lightning during a storm in late 2021, and while damage was not severe, an inspection recommended restoration work be done. The Site Committee wrote and presented the proposal in late 2022. A representative from the Champlin Foundation visited the site in March of this year, and according to President John Dower, and Site Committee co-chairs Susan Dower and Denise Boule, the visit went very well, but not exactly as expected.

Rather than questions about the project itself and the \$53,000 proposal put forward by Abcore, the restoration team; the Foundation wanted to know more about the programs we offer to the public, and the educational efforts of our historic house museum. We had supplied Champlin Foundation with an overview of such efforts over the past few years as well as a few years of education program brochures. John Dower and Denise Boule brought the representative up to date on plans for our future season.

This illustrates that many of these foundations such as Champlin, the 1776 Foundation, and others that have long helped to maintain historic houses are looking for the purpose of their support; that is to say, what the historic house museum offers to the community beyond being an old house in need of repair. We are truly fortunate then that we have one of the most important sites in the state, and have been presenting such educational programming beyond our annual fundraising events for the past seven years.

We look forward to hearing good news from the foundation.

Book Recommendations

by Mark Burnham & Bob Geake

Our First Civil War, Patriots and Loyalists in the American Revolution, by H.W. Brands (Doubleday 2021).

This is a very readable history of the American Revolution and the days leading up to it. The author includes many quotes from documents, diaries etc. written at the time and they are always entertaining as well as enlightening. The events are looked at from the perspective of Patriots (those favoring independence), Loyalists/Tories (those favoring a variety of plans that would keep the colonies as part of the English Empire). Families were split and some of the fiercest fighting in the war (in a “take no prisoners” kind of way) were between Patriot and Loyalist troops in the Southern Colonies. You also learn about the dilemma faced by enslaved and indigenous people at this time. Blacks and Indian tribes sought out Patriot or Loyalist sides depending on which association they felt would result in their freedom. 444 pages of good reading. I highly recommend it.

Stamped (For Kids) Racism, Antiracism, and You by Jason Reynolds, Ibram X. Kendi and Adapted by Sonja Cherry-Paul (Little, Brown and Company 2021).

This 164 page book packs a lot into a small book. Based on the National Book Winner **Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America.** by Ibram X. Kenji (2017) this Middle-School level book helps make a difficult but important subject understandable. It also contains a time-line of critical events, a glossary of important words to the subject that are not always easy to define off the top of your head. It also has a list of Further Readings. Eyes will be opened - which I would say about the original 2017 volume. It presented a history I had never heard. Again, highly recommended.

Washington Black by Esi Edugyan Vintage Paperback, 2019 Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2019

On a recent return from Washington, D.C. I browsed through a shop in the train station displaying a rack of new novels from the New York Times recommended lists. As a historian, I admit that it is rather rare now that I read a novel. I occasionally will return to someone I've read from my own early days of writing novels, those who inspired my own fiction, and inspired me in reading their work. Many are gone now, and I confess that I knew only a few names of the authors there.

One book caught my eye: a novel entitled “Washington Black”. Perhaps because I had posed beside a bronze statue of Washington earlier in the day, or perhaps because I had wondered as I toured the grand mansion of a turn of the century Ambassador and wondered about the lives of the “colored” servants there; I picked up the book and read it over the next two days.

The author, Esi Edugyan has written an often enthralling tale of an eleven year old enslaved boy in Barbados for whom the book is named. The beginnings of the novel and young Washington's story reveal the brutal life the enslaved had on the sugar plantations/ a crippling existence that often cut short an enslaved workers life within ten years, if they did not die of disease before then. Young Washington is saved from a life in the fields by being chosen for domestic work, and after a brief time in the kitchen of the grand house, given to the eccentric, but kind brother of the plantation's master.

Thereafter begins an improbable, lengthy journey that the reader is taken along, from a balloon voyage gone awry, to the discovery of Washington Black's artistic talent and affinity for sea life eventually propels him into creating the design of the world's first outdoor aquarium. It is an achievement he knows, for which he will never receive credit.

In the end, things come full circle for Washington Black and his one-time benefactor, the eccentric English explorer and would-be balloonist though there reunion is awkward and painfully lacking in credibility. The use of a gesture, indicating forgiveness from Washington Black turned me away from what I hoped would be a more tangible conclusion, even if it be the bitter realization that such friendships could not be sustained in that time and place.

But by then I had decided that this was a novel written for white people seeking some forgiveness of their own, that perhaps those beautiful observations that Washington learns to write of, that those adventures and travel he undertakes were possible for an enslaved boy on a plantation, that such opportunity for the freedom in which he lived while improbable, was possible; and therefore even in the depths of enslavement there was a glimmer of hope. If only it were true, even remotely possible. But then it wouldn't be a novel.

Children's Pages

Colonial Farmer



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It was hard work to prepare the land to plant crops here at Cocumscusoc (that's the name of the land on which Smith's Castle stands), although the soil was quite fertile. The Smiths and Updikes raised corn, wheat, and hay for their cows, goats, sheep, and hogs. An important product made from the milk was Good Rhode Island Cheese which was sold throughout New England and shipped all the way to the West Indies. We know that they also had a large apple orchard here and raised other fruits and vegetables for their large families to eat.

Wampumpeag (Wampum)

For Indigenous groups all over America, jewelry made from bone, feathers, claws, and other natural materials had many social, economic, political, and religious implications. For example, throughout the Northeastern woodlands, tiny cylindrical shell beads, called "wampumpeag" or what colonists called "wampum," held extreme significance for the Iroquoian and Algonquian people. The sacred beads, carved from white and purple seashells, were woven into belts, accessories, and other adornments for various diplomatic and social purposes. Wampum and the treaties or meanings they might convey continue to carry importance and are still used in ceremonies and agreements between native nations today.



Along Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island, the Narragansett people harvested mussels, clams, and quahogs from the estuaries and coves that were close to their summer encampments. They kept the quahog shells from summer feasts and brought them back to winter encampments where only the women of highest rank could perform the process of turning the shells into the sacred beads. Places such as Co-cumscussoc were a source of these shells, as well as other important resources.



Around and About Smith's Castle:

April 22nd: Breakfast Talk 9:30 a.m.—11:00 a.m.
Marilyn Harris presents *A History of Docenting at Smith's Castle*

May 6th 11:00-4:00 p.m. Opening Day

May 13th 4:30-6:00p.m. *Mothers Day Tea with Mark Burnham & Co.*

May 18th 6:00-7:30 p.m. An Evening with...

.Bob Geake presents *In Their Master's Stead*

May 27th Breakfast Talk 9:30-11:00a.m.

Tim Cranston discusses Women of Wickford

June 10th Breakfast Talk 9:30-11:00a.m.

Keith Stokes presents 18th and 19th century Black Entrepreneurs

June 11th Tea & History: 4:30-6:00p.m.

Loren Poirier presents Smith's Castle's 18th Century Loom (a talk and demonstration)

June 14th 6:00-7:30 p.m. An Evening with...

Patrick Donovan and Maria Vasquez of the Varum Museum on *Flag Restoration and Repair.*

June 24th 12:00-4:00p.m.

Strawberry Festival

July 1st Breakfast Talk 9:30-11:00a.m.

Charles Laurant presents *A History of Hopelands*



Above: Smith's Castle Officers and docents unveil the 75th Anniversary logo that will be used through the coming season to celebrate the forming of The Cocumscussoc Association. L-R Catherine Delorme, John Dower, Marilyn Harris, Mark Burnham. At right: Docents are prepared for an eventful 2023 season.



Smith's Castle is looking to host an art show of works based upon the historic house, grounds, and history of the Castle. We are looking for local artists who might be interested in submitting work for this exhibit.

Our major theme will be interpretations of the Updike mansion when it was a plantation as this exhibit would be displayed from an Opening September 9th through the seminar "Anchored in Rhode Island: The Slave Trade and Reckoning with Our Past" which will be held on October 14, 2023.





THE CASTLE'S 18TH CENTURY LOOM READY FOR USE

Marilyn T. Harris

Most historical homes feature spinning wheels of various types, but not many are lucky enough to have a working barn loom. This is largely due to the size and floor space required to display it, the difficulty of finding craftspeople skilled in repairing and/or maintaining it, and the fact that the use of such a loom is becoming a dying art. Through a restoration and dressing project spearheaded by Docent (and weaver) Lauren Poirier with technical expertise from Suzi Ballenger of the RealFibers Studio, we were able to bring those elements together last Fall. Our guests at Christmas at the Castle 2022 were the first to be able to enjoy the unique experience of seeing an 18th century loom in operation.

The Smith Castle Loom was one of the first donations to Smith's Castle in its early days as a historic house open to the public. It is a pine barn loom built in 1784 by John Hoxie. While many ascribe its name to the fact that it was often found in a barn (because of its size), experts now feel it is probably because the basic frame of the loom is similar to the framing of a barn with mortise and tenon construction. A plantation the size of Cocumscussoc may have had its own loom, but weaving in colonial times was often done by itinerant weavers who brought their disassembled looms with them to work for a few months. Look for the carved Roman numerals that possibly once assisted an itinerant weaver in matching parts to re-assemble his loom. .

When you visit Smith's Castle, be sure to visit our working barn loom in the 2nd floor Great Chamber. Guests at the Castle's June 11th Afternoon Tea will also be able to hear and see Lauren at work; see our website for more information.

RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP TODAY

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

MEMBERSHIP: SINGLE : \$30 FAMILY: \$50 SUPPORTER: \$100

Make check to The Cocumscussoc Association and mail to 55 Richard Smith Dr. North Kingstown, RI 02504

