

THE COCUMSCUSSOC ASSOCIATION

The Castle Chronicle

Summer 2024

Vol. 8 Issue 2

Season underway with Breakfast Talks, Lectures on the Lawn, Teas and Festivals

Our 76th season got underway with our Opening Day on May 4th, which saw an opening parade down Richard Smith Drive to the front lawn where remarks were made by town historian Tim Cranston, and Town Council member Matthew McCoy. Among the re-enactors who attended were the Lebanon Militia, and Wedges of Time. Our Junior Docents provided colonial games for children and tours of the house went on throughout the day.

The first Breakfast Talk of the season was presented by docent and historian **Marilyn Harris**, who spoke about the Enslaved Women of Cocumscusoc. This informative presentation gave much information to both docents and visitors about the women who lived and labored inside the Castle as domestic servants.

Roger Williams University professor **Charlotte Carrington-Farmer** brought another highly informative presentation with her talk on the development of the Equine breeding in Rhode Island for the West Indies entitled "The Finest Ass in America", a reference to an actual advertisement for mules in the Providence Gazette. Rhode Island would take a lucrative role in the supplying of draught horse and mules for sugar production as well as the Narragansett Pacers, the famed riding horses for planters and overseers on the islands.



Teas began this year with a Mother's Day Tea on Saturday, May 9th and featured Mother's Day tunes from trustee and pianist Mark Burnham with son-in-law Paul Paravano supplying vocals. A second tea featured weaver **Loren Poirier**, who spoke about the Castle's barn loom and gave a demonstration.

Our first Lecture on the Lawn of the year was provided by Professor Michael J. Simpson from Johnson & Wales University, who shared the fascinating story of Prince Greene, a patriot of color who enlisted in the 1st Rhode Island Regiment. His experiences as a soldier and after the war were remarkable, and certainly befitting the title: The Ballad of Prince Greene: Resilience in Rhode Island in the Revolutionary Era.

Don't miss out! Visit <http://smithscastle.org> for more information on upcoming events.

Left, Professor and Cocumscusoc Trustee Michael J. Simpson recently gave his presentation "The Ballad of Prince Greene: Resilience in Rhode Island's Revolutionary Era". The talk was part of our Lecture on the Lawn series. Find information on upcoming events at <http://smithscastle.org/events>



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Letter From President John Dower

As many of you are already aware, Rabbit Island is now listed for sale with a local realtor. This may come as a shock to some. After all, the island is not just a pristine piece of history nestled between Mill Cove and Wickford Harbor. It has been an integral part of the landscape of Smith's Castle for centuries and holds a significant place in the lore of Cocumscussoc. So, why would we even consider selling such a treasure?

Almost immediately after taking office, I began talking about how to make Smith's Castle relevant now and for years to come as a historic house museum. It was quite apparent to me that there were a few concerns with the future of the organization. My concerns were not unfounded. It is believed that there are currently one-third fewer historic house museums in America today than we had in 2019. While COVID played a significant role in the demise of historic house museums, the truth is that all such sites were, and continue to be, under increasing pressure. It is not going away. The good news is that Smith's Castle survived that financial gut punch, but it certainly exposed our financial vulnerability.

I'm sure many of you know, I believe history, which involves an inclusive history, is our only path to relevancy as a historic house museum. Thanks to the earlier efforts of Bob Geake and Marilyn Harris, as well as the more recent work of the entire education committee, we are on the path to becoming the preeminent educational site to tell the story of slavery in Rhode Island. We have the colonial story and the story of 150 years of enslavement. All we are missing is the Narragansett story. More on that shortly.

While we have been making strides in our education mission, one crucial element needs to be added- an education center. Our annex houses a wonderful new library and a great archives area, but we desperately need a lecture hall or adequate meeting space. This is not a novel idea; it has been proposed at least twice in the past. With our educational programs in place, the need for a facility to accommodate our needs is pressing. Using the rooms in Smith's Castle as a lecture hall is not a viable alternative. We need everyone's support to make this vision a reality.

Back to the island. My initial thoughts a year ago were to accomplish a couple of things by relinquishing our control over Rabbit Island. First, we actually have no physical control over the island, and therefore, it represents a potential liability risk. Secondly, the State of Rhode Island, specifically the DEM, pays private individuals millions of dollars each year to put land into conservancy. Surely, the state would want to help Smith's Castle in our efforts to conserve the island and, at the same time, preserve nearly four centuries of Rhode Island's history. However, months of efforts dealing with multiple entities produced literally no interest in us acquiring funds for placing Rabbit Island in conservancy, which is regularly done with private individuals and nonprofits that place property into protection.

Our desire and ultimate goal to preserve the island has stayed the same. The decision to list Rabbit Island with a realtor was passed unanimously by the Board of Trustees. The board has control over our real estate holdings. Going forward, nothing will be done without board approval. Our intention to draw attention to our situation by listing the island for sale, has clearly succeeded. We are beginning to see possibilities that did not exist before listing the island.

A meeting a couple of weeks ago at Smith's Castle adds a promising glimmer of hope to all our concerns. Five members of the Narragansett Tribe met with four of our Strategic Planning Committee members. It has been many decades since anything like this has taken place. The purpose of the meeting was to begin creating a partnership with the Narragansett to share in educational pursuits. Involving the people that called Cocumscussoc their home before the arrival of Roger Williams and Richard Smith will help us draw much needed attention to our story. More visitors, more school groups, and more grant funding. Another focus during the meeting was to explore possible ways to conserve Rabbit Island. Again, the Narragansett have more avenues to help us acquire funds in exchange for conserving the island. More info is coming!

During this time period, I was given financial reports that brought into focus our actual economic situation. While we are not in desperate straits at the moment, with operational costs rising as they are, I cannot envision Smith's Castle surviving another five or ten years. Perhaps even less. As I regularly mention to our board, the days of keeping the doors open by selling strawberry shortcake and telling visitors about churning butter are numbered. We are truly at a crossroads. Acquiring funds from Rabbit Island represents our best hope for the future and, quite possibly, our last hope. It is important to note that the association's Board of Trustees has a fiduciary responsibility to protect the organization's future, something that weighs heavily on us all.

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While Smith's Castle is approaching a point in its history that will likely determine its future, we are already moving in a direction that will make the organization relevant. We have considerably more potential to make our site something quite unique in the world of historic house museums. It is just going to require us all to look at what we can become, not what we have been.

If anyone in our membership has any questions or suggestions about the future of Smith's Castle, please email me at- jbdsmithscastle@gmail.com I will be glad to meet with you and tell you what our vision is for this place we all love.



Docent Field Trip to Rosecliff Manor



DOCENTS VISIT ROSECLIFF MANSION TO SEE THE “GILDED AGE NEWPORT IN COLOR” EXHIBITION

On June 11th Smith's Castle Docents took a field trip to Newport to view a special exhibition mounted by the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and the Preservation Society of Newport. After taking an audio-guided tour of the beautiful Rosecliff Mansion, we enjoyed the exhibit, which took up most of the second floor.

The exhibit recounted the lives and accomplishments of Newport's African heritage doctors, dentists, teachers, entertainers, artists, hospitality entrepreneurs, and elected officials of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Through photographs, news clippings, clothing, furniture, and other artifacts from the collections of the Heritage Society and other organizations, we learned their stories.

The exhibition opened March 15th and will be closing on June 30th (closed from June 19-24 because of the Newport Flower Show). If you haven't had a chance to see it yet, time is running out. We found it informative and very well presented.

Smith's Castle Lesson Plans Placed on RIDE Webguide

Lesson Plans for fourth and fifth grade students created by Smith's Castle's Education Committee have been placed on the Rhode Island Department of Education's website guide for educators. The lesson plans posted are "Absolutely Free", a lesson about the formation of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment and the men from Smith's Castle who enlisted, "The Prince of Smith's Castle", which introduces students to the skills African born enslaved people would have brought with them, and tells the story of Prince Updike, the chocolate grinder whose skills earned him a living from merchant Aaron Lopez, and "A Name of One's Own", relating the experience of the enslaved being renamed, and the attempted erasing of their identities and culture.

Lesson plans were written and reviewed by committee members, and then reviewed by Anna Missurelli, Phd., an education specialist and by Bethany Cutis, a homeschooling coordinator in North Kingstown. The lesson plans were also reviewed by Cocumscussoc trustees John McNiff, and Professor Michael J. Simpson, both of whom have extensive knowledge on the subjects. It is hoped that the draw of such specific lessons will bring both public and homeschooled classes to the Castle for tours and education.

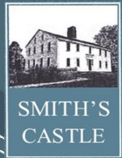
American Slavers - Merchants, Mariners, and the Transatlantic Commerce in Captive 1644 - 1865. By Sean M. Kelley, YALE University Press (2023)

This is now my Go-To book for information on the Transatlantic Slave Trade from the American perspective. It is chock full of information, especially for those of us interested in the large role played by the colony and then the state of Rhode Island. Unlike many books I've read on this subject, this one gives information on what was happening in those parts of Africa affected by the trade during this time period. It is not difficult history to read, like many history books can be. Only the subject matter makes it difficult. The author is a professor of history at Essex University in England. If you only could read one book on this subject - this is the book. **Mark H. Burnham**

James, a novel by Percival Everett, Doubleday (2024)

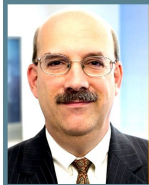
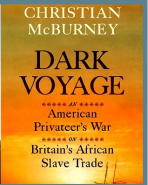
Taking on an American classic and placing that story in a new perspective can be both an invigorating challenge, and a great risk to a writer. The rewriting, if you will of Mark Twain's Classic "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" from the view of the enslaved man Jim, or James; in the long underappreciated Percival Everett's hands, becomes mesmerizing from the first few pages, and in the long trajectory of the familiar tale, we are made to look anew at moments and understand how lightly and naively we read those pages before under the guise of a runaway boy's adventure, and Jim, the enslaved man beside him as an interesting sidekick in Huck's journey along the river.

Those familiar with Twain's classic will not be disappointed, but engaged and entertained once again by the story. Those who have never read "huckleberry Finn" will find themselves reading a new classic. **Bob Geake**



2024 EVENING LECTURE SERIES

CHRISTIAN MCBURNEY
HISTORIAN, AUTHOR

McBurney's 6th book tells the fascinating story of an American privateer that sails to the coast of Africa and attacks a British slave trading post and ships during the Revolutionary War, disrupting the British slave trade.

JUNE 27TH, 6:00—7:30 P.M.
AT THE CASTLE
FREE BUT DONATIONS APPRECIATED

Check our website or Facebook page for news of other upcoming lectures and events.



Website Homepage

Smith's Castle
55 Richard Smith Drive
(401) 294-3521

North Kingstown, RI
www.smithscastle.org

NO PRE-REGISTRATION
REQUIRED

BOOK NOTES:

- Don't miss Rhode Island historian Christian McBurney's appearance at Smith's Castle on the evening of June 27th. He will be speaking about his book "Dark Voyage" about the efforts of American privateers to disrupt the British Slave Trade.
- Also coming up in late July is a reading from Jane Lancaster. The British born, long-time Rhode Island historian has turned to writing an historical novel. Read more in the listings page ahead.
- Member of the Ladies of the Green, educator Kiley Knott will read from her new novel on Lafayette and the love of his life. Join us on August 16th for a sultry evening of wine, h'ordrves, and flirtatious correspondence from the 18th century.

Around and About Smith's Castle:



Members of Professor Patricia Rubertone's class on Archeology and Material Culture pose before the Castle front door. The Brown University professor participated in archeological digs in the 1990's, and routinely brings her classes from Brown University for tours and a discussion of the Smith and Uptide family.



Trustee John McNiff, in his role as Roger Williams addresses students from the Cole Middle School in East Greenwich during a recent school tour at the Castle.

Schedule of Upcoming Events:

Saturday, June 22nd 12:00-4:00 p.m.

Strawberry Festival

Thursday, June 27th 6:00—7:30 p.m.

Lecture on the Lawn:

Christian McBurney discusses his book *Dark Voyage: An American Privateer's War on Britain's African Slave Trade*

Tuesday, July 9th 6:00-7:30 p.m.

Lecture on the Lawn:

Robert A. Geake discusses

No Meat, No Bread, No Soldier: The Campaign Against Hunger in the Revolutionary War

Sunday, July 14th 4:30 p.m.

Afternoon Tea:

Ladies of the Greene:

The ladies return for another rendition of their popular colonial fashion show

Saturday, July 20th 9:30-11:00 a.m.

Breakfast Talk:

President John Dower discusses

The Beginning of the End: The Impact of the American Revolution on the Narragansett Planters.

Thursday, July 25th 6:00-7:30 p.m.

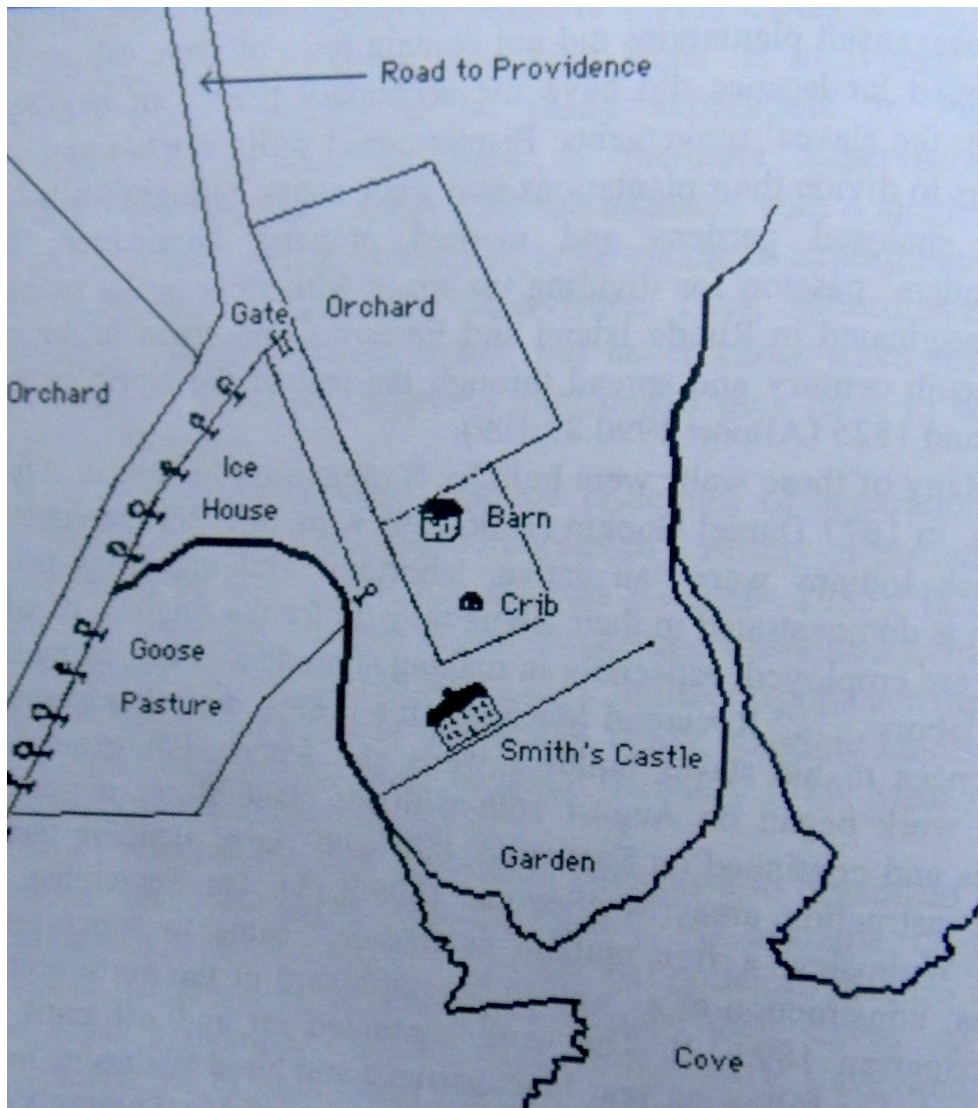
Jane Lancaster her novel in progress

Phebe and Arthur: Love, Liberty, and the American Revolution.

Sunday, August 11th 4:30 p.m.

Afternoon Tea:

Stroll the historic colonial gardens with our Master Gardener volunteers to learn of the variety of plants and their uses in the colonial era.



Can you place yourself at the Castle in present day with places on the Harris Surveying Map of 1802? If you stood behind the present “three-sisters” garden of the Master Gardener, you would be within sight of the Crib, which would have stood in the present day parking lot. The center photograph shows the remaining stones of an orchard boundary wall that ran east-west, ultimately across Post Road, as the boundary of an orchard there. A trail presently follows the stones from one side of the Farm Road trail to the other. The famous spring, mentioned in the deed from Roger Williams to Richard Smith, is right of the Ice House foundation. It’s small enclosure was restored in 2018 by Narraganset stone masons.

