



# PORTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P. O. Box 98, Portland, CT 06480

## FALL 2017 NEWSLETTER

Ruth Callander House Museum of Portland History  
492 Main St., Portland, CT 06480 Tel: 860-342-5455  
www.PortlandHistSoc.com Email: PortlandHistSoc@yahoo.com

Vol. 43 No. 2

### The Sad Fate of Joseph Stancliff

by Julie Macksoud

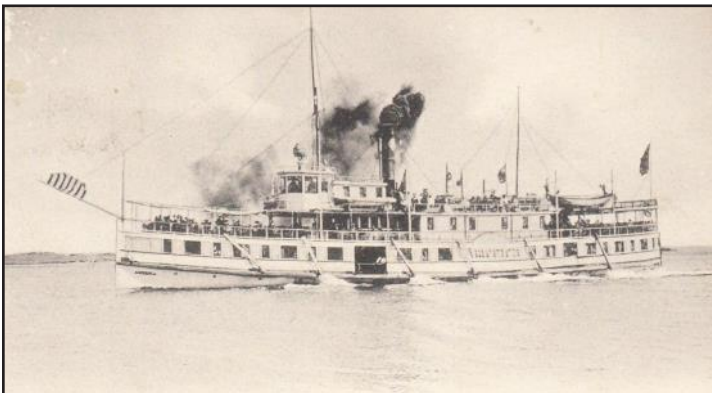
This summer will mark the 167<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a horrific event that occurred in Erie, Pennsylvania in late July, 1850; one that reverberated more than 500 miles Eastward to affect the citizenry of those who lived in the township of Portland, Connecticut (population then was 2,826).

Lloyd's *Steamboat Directory and Disasters on the Western Waters* [31 Jul 1850, p. 246-47] tells of the tragic destruction of the steamboat America on that early summer morning:

*"The afflictive event took place on Lake Erie, July 31, 1850. The head of one of the starboard boilers blew off, turning the boiler deck upside down, raising the upper deck about four feet, and making all the central part of the boat a complete wreck. As soon as the report was heard, several of the passengers jumped overboard and were not seen afterwards. Many persons were killed or wounded...The names of many of the passengers were not registered."*



Tickets are available now for an **Open House** with tours, refreshments and entertainment at the **1852 Hubbard Farmstead** located at 332 Middle Haddam Road. See page 3 for details.



One who apparently was registered was Portland's own Joseph Stancliff Jr. He was one of at least a dozen people killed in the powerful explosion (more than 22 were wounded, some severely).

Two weeks later, on Friday, August 16<sup>th</sup>, Joseph's body was brought home to Portland and interred in the Trinity Cemetery. He rests there, directly behind the Episcopal Church on Main Street. His tombstone, hewn from the local brownstone in the town's famous quarry, reveals that

*(Continued on page 2)*



This year's "Jingle & Mingle" — our 6<sup>th</sup> annual Festival of Wreaths — will be the weekend of December 2 and 3. Plan now to decorate and donate a wreath or tabletop decoration. If you just don't have the time or don't consider yourself crafty, for a donation of \$30.00 one of our elves will make a holiday decoration in your name! Participating is a wonderful way to shine the spotlight on your business, organization, family or club! Decorations can be holiday related or have a theme — Legos, Barbie or a gingerbread house decorating kit are some ideas for non-traditional wreaths.

For five years, we have raffled over 30 wreaths. Please register by calling Deb (860-342-1927) or sending an email to [PortlandCThistory@gmail.com](mailto:PortlandCThistory@gmail.com). Registration should be done by Thursday, November 30. Wreaths can be dropped off at the carriage house behind 329 Main Street on Thursday, November 30, from 5 - 7 p.m. or on Friday, December 1, from noon - 2 p.m.

Help us make this year's Festival the biggest and most beautiful ever! Plan to drop by the carriage house at 329

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## The Sad Fate of Joseph Stancliff

(Continued from page 1)

“his untimely death” at the young age of 29, was “caused by the explosion on board the Steamer America on Lake Erie, July 31, 1850.” *The Middletown Sentinel* confirmed that he was indeed one of the people killed on board. He was survived by his wife and young child.

At that time, the Great Lakes served as a highway – and a crowded one at that - to the ‘western’ frontier because anything from Chicago and beyond was considered ‘westward.’ (It is estimated that Lake Erie is home to about 2,000 shipwrecks.)

A spectator of the disaster said, “It was a melancholy sight to go through the cabin, and see the terrible condition of the wounded. On some of them scarcely a particle of skin remained, and the flesh was frightfully burned. I have never witnessed anything to be compared with this awful catastrophe. One poor woman and all her five children were dreadfully scalded. Their sufferings cannot be imagined. The woman was perfectly exhausted with suffering, but seemed to care only for her children. One of them, a little girl, tried several times to jump overboard. Her screams were agonizing to all who heard them.”

The America had been traveling from Sandusky, Ohio to Buffalo, New York. After the blast, another ship, The Alabama, came to the assistance of the damaged America and towed her into Erie, PA. The following is from the *Cleveland Herald Extra*, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1850:

*From the engineer of the Alabama, which came in at six o'clock this evening, we learn that the Alabama fell in with the America about two o'clock A.M., an hour after the terrible accident had occurred. As the boats came together he says, the persons on board the America rushed to the other boat like a flock of sheep, some with baggage on their shoulders, and nearly all in a state of confusion and bewilderment. On board the America the scene was awful - several were dead - and with their heads and legs torn off from their bodies, and many dreadfully scalded. Those who were able ran about begging for relief from their sufferings. He and others poured oil over several, until the supply was exhausted, and molasses was used in its stead.*

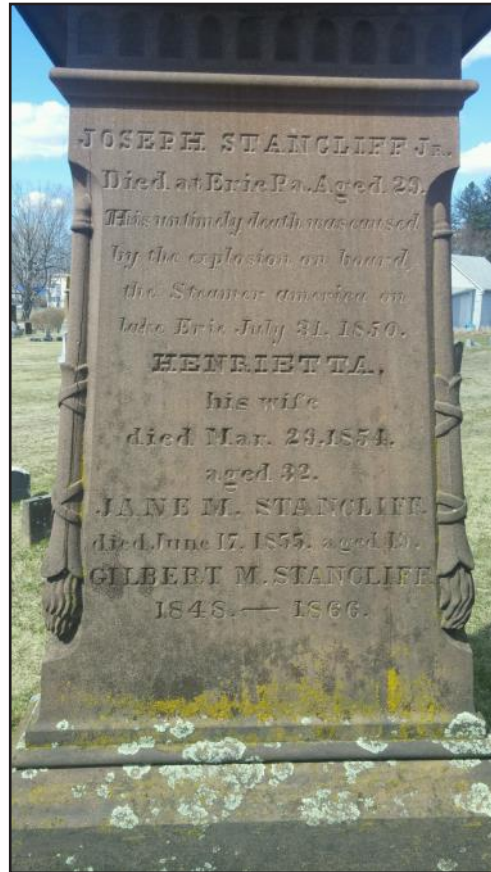
**MR. JOSEPH STANCLIFF of Durham, Ct., who is named as fatally scalded, stated his residence to one of the passengers on the Alabama, and requested him to write to his wife, that his last thought was of her.”**

Joseph Stancliff, an upholsterer by trade, was born December 27, 1820 in what was known then as Chatham, CT (now Portland), one of ten children of Joseph Stancliff Sr. [1789 -1870] and Electa Tennant [1794-1872].

His brother, John Wells “J.W.” Stancliff, was a noted naval artist and copperplate engraver [1814-1879]. Another brother, Gilbert, built one of the Octagon houses on Marlborough Street, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. The Italianate design, is thought to have been built by another brother, Charles, an architect.

They were all descendants of English stonecutter James Stancliff, said to be the first settler of historic Portland. He built a home on a six-acre parcel on what came to be known as the Brainerd Quarry back in 1690.

On Sunday, May 10, 1846, Joseph had married Henrietta Strong, daughter of Durham farmer Henry Strong (member of the Legislature in 1851). Henrietta, born on Bastille Day, July 14, 1822, died on March 28, 1853 – less than three years after her husband’s passing - during a trip to Cleveland, Ohio, at the age



of 32.

Their only child, a son, Gilbert Manning Stancliff, only lived to the age of 17. Gilbert passed away of a sudden illness in early October, 1866, in Hartford, where he had been attending school. The “promising young man had endeared himself to his teachers and fellow pupils by his kindness of disposition and general excellence of character” per *Hartford Daily Courant, Middletown, 1866, Oct. 06*. He is laid to rest with his parents in Trinity Cemetery.

Fifteen years later the worst maritime disaster in U.S. history occurred when the Sultana, a Mississippi River steamboat exploded, burned and sank near Memphis, TN on April 27, 1865. More than 1,700 passengers died, almost 200 higher than the 1,512 deaths attributed to the Titanic disaster on the North Atlantic 47 years later. The official count by the United States Customs Service was 1,800.

## Hubbard Farmstead Open House and Farm Tour

Join us on Saturday, September 16, for an Open House with tours of the 1852 Hubbard Farmstead located at 332 Middle Haddam Road. Tours will begin at 11 a.m. and end at 4 p.m.

An historic house and barn related to the early mills of Cobalt, the Hubbard Farmstead has had only two resident families — the Hubbards, and the Guilds who purchased it in 1956. After a five-year restoration by Elwin Guild and Joan Giesemann, the Farmstead was placed on the State of Connecticut List of Historic Places. In 2014, the owners received a matching grant from the CT Trust for Historic Preservation to help with the restoration of the distinctive “banked” English barn.



Family and friends will guide tours of the 1852 Greek Revival house, English barn, poultry house, organic vegetable garden and flower beds. The owner’s extensive collection of internationally created art will be on view throughout the house and barn.

Refreshments will be served and there will be musical entertainment by talented local players throughout the day. Come early and spend the day — there are plenty of tables and benches for relaxation while listening to music, enjoying the beauty of the property and savoring homemade treats.

Funds raised from ticket sales will support the mission of the Portland Historical Society to educate through the preservation and promotion of Portland’s historical legacy. **Tickets are now \$20 each and will be \$25 at the Hubbard Farmstead on the day of the tour. Portland Historical Society members will receive a \$5 discount.**

*For tickets, email [PortlandCTHistory@gmail.com](mailto:PortlandCTHistory@gmail.com), call Deb at 860-342-1927 or mail the form below.*

### Hubbard Farmstead Tour Ticket Purchase

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
St. Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City, ST, Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Payment amount \_\_\_\_\_  
# of Tickets \_\_\_\_\_ Membership \_\_\_\_\_  
Date purchased \_\_\_\_\_

Credit Card Type \_\_\_\_\_  
Credit Card No. \_\_\_\_\_  
Expiration \_\_\_\_\_ CVV Code \_\_\_\_\_

Check Amount \_\_\_\_\_  
Check # \_\_\_\_\_

**Renew or purchase a membership  
and save \$5 per ticket!**

**Mail to:** Portland Historical Society  
PO Box 98  
Portland, CT 06480

Membership Prices  
Student or Senior \$10      Individual \$15  
Family \$25                      Business \$50  
Patron \$100                      Lifetime \$400

# CALENDAR

- Sept 10** Ruth Callendar House Museum open 2 to 4 p.m.
- Sept 16** Hubbard Farmstead Open House/Tour 11a.m.to 4 p.m.
- Oct 6-8** Traveling Exhibit at Portland Agricultural Fair
- Nov 12** Ruth Callendar House Museum open 2 to 4 p.m.
- Dec 10** Ruth Callendar House Museum open 2 to 4 p.m.
- January 2018** - Watch for our *Annual Membership Meeting* and an exciting new Historic Program - notice will be in Rivereast News Bulletin and the November Newsletter.

Visitors to the Brownstone Quorum's Music Festival enjoyed the Society's traveling exhibit on Portland's historical relationship to the River. This exhibit can be seen at the Portland Agricultural Fair in October.

# JINGLE & MINGLE

*(Continued from page 1)*

Main Street between noon and 4 p.m. on Saturday, December 2 or Sunday, December 3. What better way is there to get into the holiday spirit than to explore our display of wreaths, take some chances and hopefully win your favorite!

All proceeds from this event will be used to further the mission of the Society to preserve Portland's history and to fund educational projects for the community.



**NEWSLETTER** - Claire Frisbie, 9-1-2017, 860-335-8581

## September 2017 Newsletter!

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*Hubbard Farmstead Open House & Tour  
September 16, 2017 - Information enclosed*

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