



PORTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P. O. Box 98, Portland, CT 06480

May 2021 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. 47 No. 1

THE 25th ANNUAL TOWN-WIDE TAG SALES DAY WILL GO ON!

This year, the Society Executive Board was determined to bring back Portland's annual Tag Sale Day after a year's cancellation due to COVID-19... Based on an abundance of caution, the Board decided the sale day should not occur in early May but felt that late summer, early fall would be safer for everyone — those people having sales as well as the hundreds of people who come to town for the day of bargains. Mark your calendars, pile those boxes a little higher and get ready for **Saturday, August 28, 2021 — the 25th Annual Town-Wide Tag Sale Day**. The Society thanks all who have supported them in the past on Tag Sale Day — the map sponsors, families and organizations — and hopes that you will be ready to register your sale this summer. As long as local numbers look good and the pandemic doesn't change course, the Tag Sale Day tradition will live on.

Watch for the Town-Wide Tag Sales Day registration to begin Saturday, July 10th, online and on paper!

This article is in a series on local businesses to inform our readers on the variety of Businesses and the People that own and operate them who are an integral part of the fabric of our Portland Community.

WINCHESTER CAFÉ (Walt's Drive-In)

by George M. Gilbert III

[This article on Walt's Drive In and Winchester Cafe has special meaning for the author. When I was very young (around 12 years old) I used to work with Gordon Moore the caretaker of the Taylor Estate (now known as St. Clements). Whenever I worked for Mr. Moore he would treat me to breakfast at Walt's Drive-In. Mrs. Grabek would be cooking, while Walter and Gordon Moore would be solving the world's problems with spirited conversations.]

Back in the nineteen thirties and forties when Portland was an agrarian town, many boys went to school up to the 6th-8th grade. The girls had a tendency to stay in school longer. These were the years following the "Great Depression" when children were encouraged to earn an 'honest days wage'. Some of the boys such as Walter Grabek left school to work in the tobacco fields. Relative to the other jobs available during these times tobacco was a good paying job. Walter went on to work tobacco while pursuing musical talents such as playing the clarinet and saxophone. His practice on those instruments paid off, as he went on to form the Krakowska Orchestra playing weekly at the Polish National Home in Hartford, traveling out of state and recording for RCA Victor.

After working in the tobacco fields for several years Walter started working for Colt Firearms in Hartford. It was there that he met his soulmate, Stephanie Traskos. They started a family and pursued the good life that hard

(Continued on page 4)



Walter and Stephanie Grabek (circa 1936) posing in front of Stephanie's brother's house on Perry Avenue in Portland.

If the Portland Historical Society is an organization you value, please consider joining as a member. If you are a lapsed member, we welcome you back with open arms.

Membership supports our activities collecting, preserving and sharing Portland's history. Please check the member list below to see if your membership is current. Annual dues: Senior or Student \$10, Individual \$15, Family \$25, Business \$50, Patron \$100, Life \$400. New memberships and renewals may be purchased online at www.PortlandHistSoc.org or contact us at PortlandCTHistory@gmail.com or 860-335-8581. Interested in more involvement? Become a volunteer - contact us!

Members and Donors to the Portland Historical Society – Thank you for your support!

Current Member List

Ackerman, Bill & Kathi	Hale, W. Andrew	Robinson, Bethia Kelsey
Aresco, Patricia S.	Harmon, Richard	Rooth, Curtis
Baker, Karen	Heffernan, Beverly	Rosenbaum, Howard
Barrows, Anne & William	Heidenis, Doris Sherrow	Ruffino, Kathleen Alwell
Benashski, Barbara & Robert	Hughes, Joan B.	Ruot, Helen
Bourret, Sandy	Jarvis, Penfield	Ruot Jr., William C. (Chuck)
Bransfield, Harriet	Johnson, Charles B.	Rush, Thomas
Brazauski, Philip	Jozus, Ivar & Carol	Sanborn, Harriet/Maureen/William
Brede, Colleen M.	Kalisz, Allene	Sanborn Jr., Frank L.
Brooks, Marilyn Hale	Kavanaugh, Anne	Sarbaugh, James
Buds on Main LLC, - Susan Hale-	Keech, Jackie	Scheer, Babs & George
Colby	Kelsey, Jean	Schumacher, Alice
Burbank, Marybeth Keser	Kelsey, Richard & Terry	Scianna, Mr/ Mrs. Peter P.
Burke, Dr./ Mrs. Gerald	Knous, Fred & Amy	Scott, Douglas & Katherine
C.S.B. Inc	Kogut, Lori A.	Sequenzia, Barbara & Robert
Chapman, Wayne & Margot	Kranyak, Ann - Valley View Farm	Shefcyk, Jacalyn
Coe, Margaret	Kutz, Mrs. Roselies	Shefcyk, Rose
Crowther, Eleanor	Lacaille, Ed & Jan	Silberstein, Irene & Allen
Cunningham, Denis & Linda	Lane, Richard & Judy	Smith, Roy (Andrew)
Cunningham, Linda L.	Law, George & Elaine	Snyder, Judy & Ray
Davis, Jan & Dan	Levay, John	Spooner, Nancy
deBerry, Carol M.	Lindquist, Robert C.	Sprague, Frances
DeGraff, Marie	Lineen Jr., Marty	Stemmler, Michael A.
Dickerson, Laurie & Rick	Macksoud, Julie	Sterry, John & Jane
Dillon, Bernadette	Marino, Eileen G.	Stettbacher, PhD, Joan
Dillon, Dolores	McCabe, Jim/Martha	Sullivan, Bill and Chris
DiNatale, Frances	McDougall, Dylan Stephen	Sullivan, Eileen
Dolan, Mary Ann	McDougall, Luiza & Heather	Sullivan, Eric
Dower, Walter & Vivian	McDougall, Robert W.	Sutkowski, Laura
duPont, Judith Gildersleeve	Meckensturm, Marilyn H.	Swanson, Martha & Jay
Elder, Jim & Judi	Morse, Phyllis	Swanson, Nancy & George
Ellis, Jane	Murray, Caroline D.	Taylor, Donald A.
Ellsworth, Deborah	Nash, Mary Jane	Tierney, Peggy
Ellsworth, McClure	Olsen, Walter A.	Unikewicz, Elizabeth
Fazzino, Elaine	Organek, Mr/ Mrs Edward	Valk, Barbara B.
Fillback Sr., Richard/Joanne Manter	Otterbein, John	Weeks, Kenneth
Finkelstein, Mark J.	Peltz, Ethel Grower	Whealey, Lois
Flood, Mary H.	Perruccio, Virginia J.	Whittaker, Liz Grower
Foster, Jane	Perry, Janet L. Barrows	Wildenrad, Betsy
Freeburg, Ruth S.	Pestritto, Joan	Wilson, Alfreda B.
Frisbie, Claire	Peterson, Ernest F	Wilson, Janis M.
Gilbert, George	Peterson, John & Marlene	Woltmann, Regina
Gilbert, Joan R.	Petzold, William	Woronoff, Susanne Anderson
Gildersleeve, Lynn	Pont, Mary	Young, Kelle
Gildersleeve, Richard O.	Portland Discount Liquors	Young, Susan Alyson
Goodrich, Alan & Maria	Portland Floor Covering - Jeffrey Gates	Zabiski, John & Cheryl
Goodrich, Donald W.	Portland Home & Hardware	Zimmer, Nancy Child
Goodrich, Patricia	- Grant Sanborn	
Gottas Farm, Richard & Jackie	Rau, Jim & Susan	
Guilmette, Randy & Joan	Richards, Kathleen	

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE by Julie Macksoud



I hope this brand-new year is off to a great start for you and your family. I am Julie Macksoud, new president of the Portland Historical Society. It is humbling to be part of a board of such committed and knowledgeable members, and to have the baton passed to me from George Gilbert, whose generous leadership these past four years has held us in good stead – despite the Covid 19 pandemic – allowing us to re-imagine how best to serve this wonderful town by preserving our rich cultural heritage. I welcome you to join us in the plans and projects we will be unfolding in 2021. **Do you have a spare hour or two a month you could contribute to joining a committee (i.e., exhibits, membership, publicity)? Let us know what you would like to see written about in this newsletter; suggest topics and/or speakers for programs, ideas to attract new members and friends. We want to hear from you.** Check out our Facebook page and stay tuned for word on some exciting things we will be working on this year. While I am not a Connecticut native (having moved here in 2015 from Maine) I have fallen in love with this charming, historical town and have enjoyed learning about its beginning, its architecture, its Indian heritage and its notable townsmen. Join me in discovering even more. We depend on your continued interest and support and look forward to welcoming you to the Ruth Callander House Museum when it is safe to do so (hopefully soon). Until then, stay safe and well.

DOCUMENTING PORTLAND DURING COVID-19 by Deborah Ellsworth

As I was driving towards Hartford recently, sitting in traffic in South Glastonbury because of road work, I flashed back to a year ago. Did anyone take a photo of Portland's Main Street with no traffic? Did you document the signs in our open businesses saying "Masks Required"? Keep track of how many times you tried to find antibacterial wipes at the store or online? Speaking of online, did you keep track of how many packages have been delivered to your house this year? How long did it take you to be comfortable in a Zoom meeting? How many YouTube videos did you watch to figure out someone's math homework? What did you finally have time to learn how to cook...once you could find all the ingredients? What became your "go to" dinner for the family? What's your favorite book from this past year? What show did you binge watch? Oh, the ways we have passed this pandemic time. And what a lot we have learned about ourselves — as individuals, family members and part of this community of Portland.

Since the 1970's, the Portland Historical Society has been collecting items that tell our town's story. We have artifacts from the Wangunks, journals from our founding families, tools from the brownstone quarries and Gildersleeve shipyards, photos of the bridge being built, Memorial Day parades. The list could go on and on.

Fast forward to today. We are currently living through history! Over a year ago, Portland residents went into lockdown — schools closed, restaurants went to take out food only, church services went online, hair and nail salons closed for weeks, lines formed outside supermarkets and many of our residents became "essential workers." And masks became the latest fashion trend. Do you remember all the shortages that have come and gone and come again? Parents worked from home and helped their kids with schoolwork.

We need your help to document what is going on in your homes and at your jobs. Working with the Portland Library, we are hoping to hear the voices and see the lives of Portland folk this past year. We want to know how you and your family are experiencing this current pandemic. One hundred years from now, we want people to understand the joys and disappointments, the achievements and failings of these times. We want them to know how your everyday life changed — even what the weather was like, the neighborhood stories or what you made for dinner. Some of the most treasured artifacts in our collection are diaries and journals of our early ancestors, as well as scrapbooks with newspaper clippings covering everything from world and local news, engagements and weddings, births and deaths, store advertisements and trending recipes.

While future historians will rely on newspapers, statistics and public documents to try to understand the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers will be able to understand how everyday people continued their lives through this past year if we take the time now to document our lives in writing — essays, journals, poetry, social media postings and oral histories; in art — drawings and paintings, photographs, video, quilts and music.

(Continued on page 8)

*(Winchester Cafe
- Continued
from page 1)*

work and perseverance can bring. Walter was playing in bands and traveling many hours to distant cities to play his band music. Walt would think nothing of leaving Colt's after work at 3:30 p.m. to travel to Albany, NY or some other city to play with the band and then be back at work at Colt's in the morning. Needless to say, this was a grueling schedule that Walter had no intention of continuing for the rest of his life. In trying to come up with a career to keep Walt and Stephanie home together at night, they settled on a hot dog stand.

During the 1940's, Route 66 (constructed in 1928-29) was a main east/west thoroughfare since Interstate 84 was not yet constructed. At first, the Grabeks were living in Middletown. Soon they found land to build their hot dog stand on Route 66. It was a small piece of land nestled between East Hampton Road (now Route 66) and Middle Haddam Road in Portland. It was there that Walter and Stephanie built Walt's Drive In, to try for "a few years." This property was sold to them by John Payne in 1947. (John Payne was one of the more successful Portland farmers of that time who owned many acres of land that were farmed as orchards, vegetables and pastures for his dairy cattle.) Walter spent 37 years there.

While still living in Middletown, their five year old daughter, Donna, had started kindergarten at St. John's School. Donna, being an independent thinker, at an early age decided she could walk home without the help of her babysitter, who would be getting out of class ten minutes later. Donna walked, unescorted at five years old from St John's School to the Grabek home on a small side street off Washington Street all by herself. Mom and Dad were definitely not happy.



Walter's first stand. Bill Rau is the customer talking to Walter. The glass doors on the east side of the building allowed local farmers such as Charlie Johnson of Grandview Farm and Melvin Strickland of Strickland Egg Farm to make daily deliveries of milk and eggs (respectively) to the Grabeks.



Walter, Donna & her cousin, Frank Traskos, going to visit Santa at Bunce's Department Store in Middletown.

(Continued on page 6)

PRESERVING THE ORIGINAL GILDERSLEEVE STORE



The original Gildersleeve Store was moved in the 1850s to its present site behind a house further south on Main Street. Photo by Gabriella Andrew.

**Right top: 1st floor interior
Right bottom: 2nd floor interior**

Sylvester said, “You will be surprised by the new store when you come from school!” The present location of this letter is unknown, but is thought to have been written between 1854 and 1858. In 1983, a program was presented at the Society’s June meeting on the Gildersleeve Store.

The Society has collections of ledgers and other papers from the Gildersleeve Store. As research continues, more information regarding this building may be found in these papers.

Restoration Carpentry has been hired to perform a historical survey of the building—fully documenting the structure and marking all the pieces. This would allow the building to be dismantled as that has been recommended in order to move it safely. It would later be reconstructed at the new site. A proposal has been made and discussed with the town to, once moved, reconstruct the building behind the Society’s museum which would allow it to be used in conjunction with the museum for exhibits or storage once it was reconstructed and suitably finished inside. This project is under the guidance of Society Trustee Robert McDougall and to date, the Society Board has approved the historic survey and is examining next steps in the process.

This is a significant undertaking for the Society, but the historical importance of this structure to the town of Portland makes it a worthwhile goal. It is hoped that some grant monies may be obtained to assist with this project. Donations to assist in this important preservation project will be gratefully received. Checks may be mailed to the Society at PO Box 98, Portland, CT 06480 or donations may be made online at

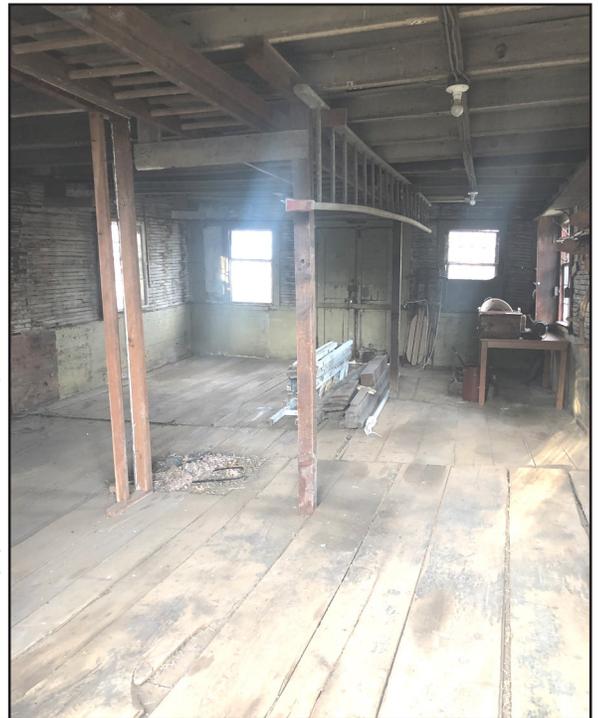
<https://portland-historical-society-inc.square.site/membershipdonations>

The original Gildersleeve Store, built in 1821 at the southwest corner of Main Street and Indian Hill Avenue, has recently been given to the Portland Historical Society by the Harold Larson family. It is presently located behind 572 Main Street and will be moved for preservation by the Society.

Preservation of this building has long been discussed by the Larson family and the Society though only recently did it become an active project.

The building was originally offered to the Society in 1974 and 1975. In 1976, a committee was appointed to research the history of the building and the costs of moving it.

In the early 1980’s, a Gildersleeve descendent noted he found a letter from Sylvester Gildersleeve to his son, Ferdinand, who was away at school in Colchester.



(Winchester Cafe - Continued from page 4)

After a couple of years at the restaurant, Walter and Stephanie decided to add indoor dining and have living quarters in the back; this would eliminate traveling back and forth to Middletown. It was then that Donna started first grade at St. Mary School in Portland. Her class, the Class of '58, was the first class to graduate from the "new brick, one-level school" on Freestone Avenue. Her neighbor, Robbie Seiferman, drove the school bus during her St. Mary School years.

The Grabek family lived in the loft of Walt's Drive-In for three years before building a brick house set further back on the property in 1954. Builder Ed Wilk with the help of Bill McBrien built their dream home. The Grabeks often hosted family gatherings. Walter's 12 brothers and sisters and Stephanie's six siblings often felt that they were the "rich relatives" with the large house. By today's standards the house is small.

After graduating from Mount St. Joseph Academy in West Hartford and the Boston Conservatory of Music with a BFA, Donna moved to New York City to pur-



Walter and Stephanie (circa 1969) with their faithful companion, Tina, at Stephanie's feet. Donna rescued Tina and another dog, Vernon, from a choreographer that she worked with in New York, NY.



Donna ready for action at the Winchester. She is celebrating her 39th year in business.

sue her career as a dancer. She was dancing in professional shows in New York, Mexico City and did a short tour in Columbia, South America. After five years of night club, television, and movie work in Mexico, Donna moved to the Miami area where she spent three years working on various cruise ship lines, such as Royal Caribbean, Norwegian Caribbean and Costa Lines. Many famous people from many different countries including the United States were met along the way.

In the late 1970's, Donna was informed that her mother was suffering from cancer. Donna had moved to Las Vegas and was working at the Sahara Hotel when she invited her parents to visit. Walt and Stephanie rarely left the business and with no one to run Walt's Drive-In for them, they closed the business while going to visit their daughter. Donna in the meantime had begged her employer for a limousine to pick them up at the airport. Walt and Stephanie were certainly surprised when there was a limo to take them to Donna's house. Of course, Donna's mother felt the limo was too big and way too fancy.

Stephanie's cancer continued to progress. The treatments were not very effective. In 1982 Donna came home to help her Mom. Stephanie died in 1984.

(Continued on page 7)

(Winchester Café continued from page 6)

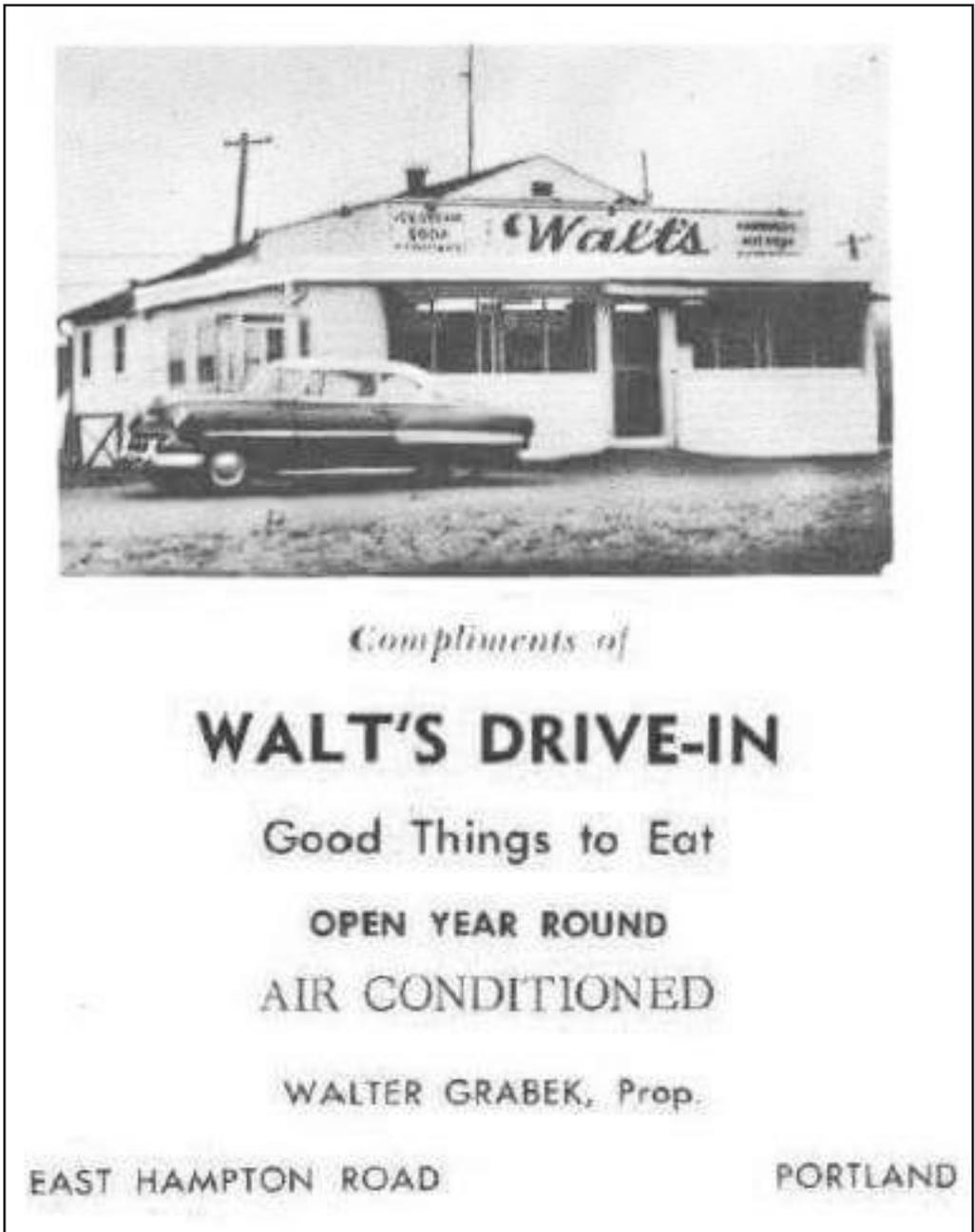
While getting ready to come back East, Donna had feisty conversations with her father to close Walt's Drive-In and open a bar and restaurant. Donna came back from out West with some ideas. She wanted to open an establishment with a western theme and motif. She had what her father called "a lot of rusty stuff" to adorn the walls.

With Donna's creative talents, a different type of atmosphere evolved that you would not normally see "back East". The rest is history. Donna has been running the Winchester ever since, even surpassing Dad at 39 years in 2021.

During normal times (non-Covid), she has local bands that play. The menu has expanded over the years and "specials" are always in demand. Donna has car shows during the summer with proceeds going to the Portland Food Bank. Connecticut Draft Horse Rescue is another charity they support.

As a multi-generational Portland family business, "The Winchester" continues to contribute to our local community.

Thank you Donna.



Above: Ad-book photo circa 1954. Note the phone booth on the left side of the building. Up to 1954, the Grabek family was living in the hot dog stand.

Left: The Winchester as it stands today.



*Teacher's
Appreciation
Parade
May 8, 2020*

(Documenting COVID-19 Continued from page 3)

We are hoping that the collection will help create exhibits in the future at the Ruth Callander House Museum of Portland History and the Portland Library.

We welcome all community members to contribute documents digitally. Email your submissions to the Society at PortlandCTHistory@gmail.com with subject: COVID collection. Include contact information. Digital format is preferred (PDF or JPG) but you may send copies or photos to the Portland Historical Society, PO Box 98, Portland CT 06480. Prompts for writing and artwork are available online at portlandhistsoc.org. These prompts are shared by Jesse Nasta, Executive Director of the Middlesex County Historical Society. Questions can be emailed to PortlandCTHistory@gmail.com.

NEWSLETTER - Editor: Claire Frisbie, 5/28/2021, PortlandCTHistory@gmail.com 860-335-8581
 Printing by DEL Printing, LLC, 42 Gospel Lane, Portland, CT - 860-342-2959

May 2021 Newsletter!

FINANCE BOARD
 Frank Connelly
 George Law
 David O'Brien
COLLECTIONS BOARD
 Rebecca Robinson
 Frank Winski

TRUSTEES
 Position open—volunteers welcome
 Claire Frisbie
 Robert McDougall
 Christine Sullivan

DIRECTORS
 Amy Knous
 Martha Luteci
2021 SOCIETY OFFICERS
 President - Julie Mackson
 1st Vice President - Alexia Belperon
 2nd Vice President - George Gilbert
 Recording Secretary - Deborah Ellsworth
 Corresponding Secretary - Linda Cunningham
 Treasurer - James McCabe

**25th ANNUAL TOWN WIDE TAG SALES DAY
 SATURDAY, AUGUST 28, 2021**

NON-PROFIT ORG
 U.S. POSTAGE PAID
 MIDDLETOWN CT
 PERMIT NO 575

PORTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY
 PO Box 98, Portland, CT 06480
 Address Service Requested

