



PORTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P. O. Box 98, Portland, CT 06480

July 2022 Newsletter

Ruth Callander House Museum of Portland History
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Vol. 48 No. 2

President's Letter

I am delighted to report that the Portland Historical Society has enjoyed a remarkably productive spring, due in part to the infusion of new energy brought in the form of three new board members: Debra Freitag, Frank Winiski, and Susan Bransfield (pictured here).



In April, we appreciated the hard work of Boy Scout Troop 2 who came to refresh our new tag sale signs – they did a fabulous job for us and we are very grateful for their assistance.

In May, we embraced the 26th annual town-wide tag sale which benefits our Ruth Callander House Museum of Portland History at 492 Main Street. It literally takes months of preparation but is always a welcome and worthwhile event. Next on May 20th, the newly refurbished Welcome to Portland sign was unveiled. The society is proud to have restored this treasured landmark near the Arrigoni Bridge in appreciation for

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The Life and Times of Perry Titus Wells Hale

When you drive by an old house don't you sometimes wonder about the house's history: who built it, what kind of people were they, or who was born in or died in the house? For more than two decades a remarkable man lived in the c. 1800 Colonial at 242 Main St. in Portland, at the corner of Main and Commerce.

Perry Titus Wells Hale was born October 7, 1878, in one of the little Victorians across the street from the original St. Mary's Church on Freestone Ave. He was the fourth and last child of Asaph Henry Hale and Mary Jane Rathbun. Perry's father was one of the owners of the Strong and Hale Lumber Company; Asaph was also a man committed to public service, as was his father, Titus Hale.

Early on Perry's parents noticed their son's intellect, curiosity, and imagination. Perry enjoyed carpentry, tinkering, and repairing and improving things. One trait particularly stood out: Perry was kinetic, always on the move, and passionate about all manner of athletic competition. He was a child whose energy needed to be harnessed and directed. Asaph used to quiz Perry on history, current events, literature, and multiplication tables (up to 20) as they ran errands in a horse-drawn buckboard. (What's 16 x 17?) Asaph and his son also had mock debates on these trips.

The big event of Perry's childhood was his surviving, at age nine, the multiple-day March 1888 blizzard which killed hundreds of people and thousands of animals with its 15' drifts. Perry was walking home from school as the snow was piling up. Realizing he wasn't going to make it, he took shelter in a private home as his frantic father searched for him on horseback.



3 or 4 year old Perry Titus Wells Hale

There were not many sports offered in Portland's schools, so Perry used to participate in Middletown's sports,

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The Life and Times of Perry Hale *continued from page 1*

including playing football at Middletown High. After graduating from high school in 1896 Perry spent a year working in his father's lumberyard and honing his football skills. He wanted to attend Wesleyan and major in chemistry. His father wanted him to attend Yale and major in civil engineering, and since Asaph wasn't the kind of man you'd want to buck, Perry headed for Yale in the fall of 1897 to pursue Yale's three-year engineering degree.



**"Perry T. W. Hale,
Our New Coach"**
(1 Jan 1902 *Maiko* -
Ohio State University
publication)

considered by some to be the best collegiate fullback in the country. One reporter compared Perry's speed and agility to that of a panther, and another called him "a nearly perfect football machine." Perry played at a time when football was brutal, when you could be killed or permanently disabled facing a flying wedge formation. Players didn't wear helmets or much protective gear. There were no sophisticated diagnostic tools or treatments. One newspaper itemized 45 deaths in one five-year period, including exsanguination. Perry was injured many times, being sidelined or hospitalized with all manner of injuries, including internal bleeding. Newspapers of the era referred to Perry as "Fighting Hale," the "fighting tackle," and the "Human Battering Ram." He played to win.

In November 1899 Perry's father promised Portland's Methodist Church that if Perry survived a forthcoming Yale-Princeton game without serious injuries, Asaph would treat the congregation to a Thanksgiving dinner. Perry survived the game with just a cut/black eye, and the festive dinner was held.

From the get-go Perry immersed himself in New Haven's athletic programs. At 6' 2" he was powerfully built, once entering a muscle-man competition at Yale. He would strategize athletics; he wasn't afraid to take risks; he had a high threshold for pain. Various teams courted him including shot put, track, crew, and sailing teams, but as he said years later, "Football was meat and drink to me."

As a football player Perry was known for his versatility, playing fullback, tackle, and center. He was

Perry ended up on Gordon Brown's Team of the Century in which Yale won all of its games in the season, accruing 360 points to their opponents' ten. Perry was given an unusual gold pocket watch and a huge photographic collage commemorating the team's success. Perry was vice-president of his senior class, and he was inducted into Brazelius, one of Yale's secret societies. He graduated with honors in 1900 from Yale's Sheffield Scientific School: 1900 S.

In the fall of 1901 Perry did a one-season coaching stint at Exeter. After Exeter's last game Perry took a train to Pennsylvania, joining the (pre-NFL) Homestead Library and Athletic Club's professional team near Pittsburgh. The Club's expenses were paid by Pirates owner William Chase Temple and officers of Carnegie Steel. A *Homestead Messenger* article notes that a rival team's captain thought that Perry's addition to Homestead made Homestead 25% stronger. A November 1901 newspaper article notes a train wreck that Perry survived when the team was being transported to a game. In a game against Philly, Perry played with a broken bone in his shoulder. At some point Perry modified his team's uniform for higher performance.

After leaving Homestead, Perry returned to Portland. In February 1902 Perry and (1888) Sheff graduate Ralph M. Wilcox became partners in the surveying/engineering firm of Wilcox and Hale. At some point Perry patented a circulating pump for cars. He continued athletic pursuits, winning a footrace for the Middletown Elks, bicycling, and refereeing various sports. Perry joined the CT National Guard in April 1902, and stayed in the Guard until April 1905.

By the summer of 1902 Perry's friends encouraged him to run for sheriff of Middlesex county. With his leadership skills, larger-than-life reputation, and law-and-order orientation, there was a good chance he'd win. He toyed with the idea, especially since it would be a way for him to continue the family tradition of public service. But football won out, and he became head coach at Ohio State for two years during which he wasn't the "winningest" coach ever, but won more games than he lost. On November 29, 1903, Perry was captain of an All-Coach team, playing against the U.S. Barracks team at Ohio State.

On December 28, 1903, Perry married Alice Pease Austin, a graduate of Middletown Business College, at her parents' home in Cromwell. Perry and Alice moved around as Perry worked as an engineer and surveyor in various municipal, hydraulic, and railroad jobs.

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The Life and Times of Perry Hale
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A heartbreaking January 4, 1905, *Hartford Courant* article describes how Perry, then Middletown's water department director, was summoned by the police to Meriden's telegraph office to subdue former New York Central surveyor, Francis Holden, who was a former classmate of Perry's. The time frame isn't known, but while Holden had been at work his head had been hit by a passing train, sustaining a traumatic brain injury. Subsequently, he experienced "spells of insanity" and it was during one of these spells in which two police officers were unable to restrain him. Perry was called to help out because of his "strength" and his friendship with Holden. During the "terrific struggle" both men fell through a large window, the "maniac" finally being put in restraints and transported to a hospital. Perry was reported as being "badly used up." (This is one of many sad stories about Perry's friends and classmates, many dying young. For example, the Team of the Century's captain, "Skim" Brown, nephew of J. P. Morgan, the financier and railroad magnate, died at thirty-one of diabetes.)

Perry saved the lives of several people. He saved a drowning friend after their sailboat capsized in a squall, and saved a boy being swept downstream in a flood. He saved a woman from being hit by a train when her horse-drawn buggy got stuck on railroad tracks. He carried a minister down a NH mountain.

From 1904 to 1908 Perry headed Middletown's water department. From 1909 to 1911 he worked as an engineer and surveyor for the Central New England Railway. The 1910 *Census* shows Perry and Alice in Bloomfield, Perry being listed as a civil engineer and Alice as not working. An October 21, 1910, *Hartford Courant* article has Perry and Alice living in Winsted, CT, where Perry was working as an engineer and helping to coach the newly-formed Winsted football team, even playing in a couple games. By 1913 everything was going well for Perry and Alice. They were back in Portland, and Perry had a good job and money in the bank. Although Perry's life had been impressive up to this time, the measure of the man was yet to be determined.

It started out innocently enough. Alice was distressed because her chickens were being stolen. Perry thought he might be able to rig a loud device to scare off thieves. One day Perry and two men were in a shed near his home, experimenting with the device. Perry



Perry with first wife, Alice

wrote in Yale's 1900 *S. Vicennial Report* about the day that changed his life. He related that on October 8, 1913, one day after his 35th birthday, "while working with some fulminate of mercury I happened to short circuit a battery through a piece of soft iron wire. This caused the wire to melt and a globule of the molten metal dropped into the fulminate of mercury and set it off... The mercury was confined in a small tin box which was not six inches in front of my person. I had on a carpenter's apron at the time, the pockets of which were filled with nails and which prevented the explosion from tearing me to shreds. I was knocked to my knees but not out... I was led into the house by a friend who was present at the doings. A doctor did not take care of me for he thought I was a goner. I was put under the influence of chloroform and removed to the hospital. It was three weeks afterward that Dr. Raftery, the Episcopal minister, hinted in his prayer that I would never see again. The shock came hard."

The AP picked up the story, which can still be found on the internet. The explosion ruptured Perry's eardrum and paralyzed two fingers on each of his hands. His brother Kellogg and friend Harry Dagnall were badly injured, copper fragments and zinc casings cutting the men; they were all burned. One newspaper stated that Perry was hospitalized for two months.

Perry spent several years at home bored, inactive, worried, and depressed. Alice got a bookkeeping job in Middletown to support the two of them, a situation that humiliated him. He tried several business ventures, including poultry farming, but went broke. At the end of WWI he received a letter from a special D.C. commission asking him to go to France to help with the European recovery, the writer not knowing Perry was blind. The letter particularly bothered him because he was fiercely patriotic and wanted to serve. A friend of Perry's from Yale heeded the call, went to France, and died there of the Spanish flu. One newspaper article has Perry addressing Portland's citizens in 1919 about the need for a new sewer system.

Children sometimes came to Perry's home to keep him company as he was somewhat of a curiosity. Often the children complained about the poor performance of their kites. Perry began thinking about their kite problem and he literally dreamed about a new kite design. Through trial and error he fine-tuned the design and applied for a patent on June 12, 1919, the Perry Hale Kite receiving a patent on July 20, 1920. It

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The Life and Times of Perry Hale
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was a type of box kite patterned along the lines of a monoplane. The kite was expensive but it had unusual lift; it couldn't be controlled with the flimsy string used to tie Portland's tobacco plants. Companies sometimes purchased the kites and printed the compa-



Perry Hale with his kite invention circa 1920s

nies' names on the wings as an advertisement. By this time newspaper articles referred to Perry as a "blind toy maker" as he designed other toys, like windmills. The reputation of the kite was enhanced when Admiral Byrd took several kites on his polar expeditions to use as a signaling device in case of an accident. Perry got a new lease on life after the patent was issued. He had hope.

In 1920 a reporter interviewed Perry for a newspaper article. A day after its publication a representative of a Hartford insurance company appeared on Perry's doorstep, pitching the idea that Perry could sell life insurance. He had always had a "horror of a life insurance agent, but my horrors were not to be pampered at this time." After a few weeks of selling insurance, in July 1920 he was able to buy a secondhand Ford, and Alice was able to quit work to become her husband's secretary and driver. Several weeks later, on August 27, 1920, forty-year-old Alice died of pneumonia. Perry was devastated because he had been totally de-

pendent on his wife. Later he wrote, "I was helpless without her."

In late 1920 some of Perry's Yale friends took him to an eye specialist at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Perry had hoped that his sight might be partially restored and that he might become productive again, but it was not to be. Again, he was disconsolate.

Perry had had a "dread of the aids resorted to by the blind," according to one newspaper article. Another paper reported that he had had "a horror of institutions for the blind." On the same trip his friends pushed him hard to visit Evergreen Junior, the Red Cross Institute for the Blind in Baltimore, which had just opened to civilians. He relented and toured the facility with "Mrs. Anne H. Geary, a woman of great charm, and Perry...talked with her as he hadn't talked to anyone for months." Emotionally overwhelmed, at the end of the day he told the director that he wanted to enroll.

At Evergreen Perry learned various skills, like how to safely cross a street and how to find your room at a hotel (by putting a rubber band on the doorknob). He studied public speaking and learned Braille. He learned to type on both a standard and a Braille typewriter, and learned to use an adding machine. He read English literature and became inspired by Dickens' characters who overcame adversity. He took manual courses, like vulcanizing, hammock-making, and carpentry. At Evergreen Perry met men in worse shape than he was, later saying, "I could site (sic) many a man there who is an example to us in the perfect way he is meeting his so called handicap." He became a lifelong friend of U.S. Navy veteran Carl Bronner "who had no eyes or hands and who took life so philosophically I was ashamed of myself." The October 1923 *Outlook for the Blind* magazine has Perry writing, "I endeavor to show a sharp appreciation of everything that is done for me; that I try to deport myself in a dignified manner; and that I know it is my duty to accept my test not only without complaint, but with pride. It is my ambition that I become an asset in the blind world." In a June 7, 1925, *Springfield Republican* article he says, "The sorrier a man feels for himself the less pity other people have for him...I made up my mind there was only one thing to do—to become reconciled to my fate and attempt to overcome the handicap as best I could." Most important, he never wanted to be seen as an object of pity.

Perry left Evergreen on May 2, 1921, taking someone with him: Mrs. Geary. The school was stunned, not being aware of the romance. With the help of Perry's friends, Perry and Anne married that day at the home

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The Life and Times of Perry Hale
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of the rector of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. A few days later the couple began their life together in Portland where they resumed the insurance business Perry had begun with Alice.

When Perry was blinded he may have been living at 430 Main St., the house his parents had bought after they moved from Freestone Ave. (By the time of the accident both of his parents had died.) The 1909 and 1913-1915 city directories have Perry and Alice living at 430 Main. The 1916-1922 directories have Perry (with Alice and later with Anne) living at 35 Marlborough St. near Perry Ave. (The street was named after him.) In 1923 his business was at 216 Main and his residence at 33 Marlborough. In 1924 his business was at 216 Main and his residence at 218 Main. In 1924 Perry's family gave him a choice of houses to live in, either 430 Main or what is now 242 Main, and he chose downtown's 242, a house that had been built as a wedding present for the son of a local brownstone quarry owner. Perry got a mortgage and built an addition to the house, as well as the small building at 238 Main where he would run his insurance business. He and Anne would live in a small apartment and rent out two units in the house.

With Portland embracing their hometown hero, Perry and Anne's whirlwind romance turned into whirlwind social and business activities. They both became insurance brokers in CT and NY. Perry served on Portland's Board of Sewer Commissioners 1920-1924. He was on the Board of Education 1919-1925. In 1922 he became the first president of the Middlesex County Democratic Club. He was a justice of the peace, known for being firm but fair. He collected Old Age Assistance taxes, and was a truant officer. He did real estate brokering. He served on the Board of Health, and helped design a new school using tactile cutouts that he could feel to show the building's plan. He gave motivational lectures rather like today's TED Talks, and lectured and wrote about history and sports. He spoke at organizations helping the disabled, YMCAs, high schools, and fraternal organizations, often pitching his kite. He gave public addresses of all sorts, and was involved in public improvement issues. His prodigious correspondence shows the many favors he did for people, like helping a Civil War widow obtain an increased benefit. He attended Yale games, often with his young driver, Elmer Tryon. On December 12, 1921, Perry was the guest of honor at the Berzelius annual dinner at the Yale Club in NYC, and attended other Berzelius dinners, as well. He attended many alumni dinners in New Haven, including one in June 1927. During the summer, Perry and Anne frequented



Evergreen Junior, school for the blind, kite making - Hale in dark suit with cap in rear

Sound View, the Hale's beach compound, often attending boat races.

In 1923 Perry wrote an autobiographical article for the American Foundation for the Blind. Also in 1923 he gave in to the suggestion of his friends and ran for the office of Portland's tax collector. This was a bold move not just because he was blind, but because Portland was heavily Republican and Perry was running as a Democrat. Perry and his friends went to the home of every registered voter in town, and he won the race and subsequent races. He worked hard at the job and memorized statistics so he could answer questions at town meeting where people paid attention to him because of his gravitas, expertise, and oratorical skills. (His blindness had led to an extremely enhanced sense of smell and hearing, and he used this acuity to his advantage in social interactions.) At one point state officials came by to find out why Portland's unpaid taxes were only two percent. He explained that he was aggressive in enforcing the law, and that he tracked down tax scofflaws by any means available. In one instance a man was trying to sneak out of town owing back taxes, and when Perry got wind of it he went to the man's house and physically blocked him until the sheriff arrived and the man paid his taxes. The dramatic scene made it into the newspapers, enhancing Perry's reputation.

Perry's kite sales were important to him not only financially but for his sense of self-worth. One day when he was first developing the kite he was flying it alone and Billy, his dog, began barking wildly. Perry heard the "pitiful cries" of his cat high above his head, the cat having been perched on Perry's shoulder and having gotten tangled in the line. Perry initially manufactured the kite at his home, but later had it made at Evergreen, and then by the American Manufacturing Concern in Falconer, NY. For many years Perry had a

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grueling schedule promoting the kite, even taking a train alone to NYC for demonstrations. He often had to pay for a driver, the driver's meals, and lodging costs, an overhead which reduced his profits.

Perry often praised the engaging, positive, and encouraging Anne, and in a June 11, 1927, article Perry said that he owed his success to his marriage to Anne, a marriage that "was to virtually make me for it gave me an impetus in life...a reason for living."

Predators took advantage of Perry. A housekeeper robbed him, even stealing valuable stamps. One tenant stole a screen door, figuring he wouldn't notice, and another tenant tore out paneling and burned it in the fireplace. At least two con men defrauded him. When Anne was vacationing in CA in 1929 she wrote to Perry the date she'd be returning to Portland. Perry's clerk didn't show up for work that day, having absconded with a lot of money. Only Perry was bonded for embezzlement.

The football legend had his issues. He was anger-based, opinionated, and prickly. He put ethics and common sense over party politics, and had critics. He was in pain from football injuries, and compromised his vascular system by smoking. He was depressed because he'd gained a lot of weight from inactivity. He periodically suffered from extreme anxiety and nervousness. He was always worried about money, and was frustrated when he had to hire someone to do a job he used to be able to do himself. He was ap-



**Wilhelmina
Frances
Piekarz, age 17
(Portland High
School 1928
yearbook)**

him and loyal. In about 1932 he hired a new clerk, Wilhelmina Frances Piekarz, the daughter of Polish farmers who had come over on the *Main* in December 1907. She had started school not speaking English, and by the time she graduated from Portland High a week after her 17th birthday she had earned a full col-

llege scholarship. As the youngest, unmarried daughter in a large immigrant family, Wilhelmina gave up her scholarship to support her parents.

Wilhelmina was an interesting woman: smart, stable, patient, competent, and hardworking. Although young, this kind and gentle woman was mature beyond her years. She and her boss worked well together, were an intellectual match, had a similar sense of humor, and shared an interest in business and politics. She grew to admire her boss's lack of elitism, the way he treated everyone as an equal. On June 1, 1936, Wilhelmina's 25th birthday, they walked across the street to the town hall, got married, and walked back to the office and returned to work. The marriage was loving, respectful, and successful. Wilhelmina was able to handle her strong-willed husband's moods and frustrations. She introduced him to Shakespeare, her favorite author. She read to him every night and became his eyes, as his other wives had done.

Eventually Perry and Anne were spending less time together and she bailed out of the marriage for good in late 1930. A divorce was granted on the grounds of desertion. Again, Perry was alone.

Perry had to rely on capable secretaries to survive. From the looks of their letters, they were protective of

legge scholarship. As the youngest, unmarried daughter in a large immigrant family, Wilhelmina gave up her scholarship to support her parents.

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**242 Main St - the Nathan Gillum House
(History & Architecture Portland, 1980)**

Perry, Jr., was born January 6, 1938. His father's supportive and playful friends (many of them grandfathers) put a photo of Perry, Jr., on the cover of a Yale publication with the caption: Our Most Recent Class Baby. Marilyn was born September 22, 1942. After the children were born the family moved to the main portion of the house where they had the insurance and tax offices, the little building being rented to a series of tenants. Perry rigged overhead wires in the house to be able to move from room to room safely.

At the end of his life Perry was writing his autobiography. (His notes, photos, and correspondence are fascinating.) His sister Jenny had cautioned him about pursuing the project, fearing that his health was so fragile that the endeavor might hasten his death. Perry responded in a 1946 letter to Jenny that if he "sat around doing absolutely nothing" it would be his undoing. "When I was first blinded I had some seven years of it and intend never again to go through a life

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The Life and Times of Perry Hale
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of idleness and semi-death.” He wasn’t able to complete the book. Perry Titus Wells Hale’s time ran out on April 7, 1948, when he died of arteriosclerosis at his home at 242 Main. Wilhelmina continued running the insurance and real estate businesses, and was the tax collector until she lost the job during a Republican sweep. When asked why she never remarried she said you don’t want to go out for hamburger after you’ve had steak at home. She died of a stroke July 9, 1974, a few feet from where her husband had died twenty-six years before. Marilyn went to college in CA and became a social worker. Perry, Jr., died October 12, 2014, in hospice under the care of the Veterans Ad-

ministration. The house was sold and renovated, and now contains several apartments.

When you drive by 242 Main you may want to think about the man who used to live there, a man who played the cards he was dealt.

The author, Marilyn Hale Brooks, was born and raised in Portland. She lives in Carñuel, New Mexico. Perry Hale was her father. Photos are courtesy of the author.

Do you have Portland history you would like to record for a future newsletter and Society archives? Contact the editor at portlandchistory@gmail.com to be a guest contributor.

NEW PRODUCTS IN THE RUTH CALLANDER CUPBOARD

Products available from Callander Cupboard at www.PortlandHistSoc.org

AVAILABLE NOW:

Cutting Board with Portland Town Seal

Board is laser engraved on one side (decorative) with the Town Seal and the blank back side is for food prep. It is tough, thick, sturdy & is made with 100% environmentally friendly bamboo which is 16% stronger than maple!

In 1966, Portland’s town seal was designed by Phil Gildersleeve, at the request of the Young Republican Town Committee. Phil was chairman of the Sesquicentennial (125th anniversary) Committee, City Editor of the Middletown Press and a noted Portland illustrator. The design would be used on a commemorative coin depicting Portland’s past. On December 31, 1969, this illustration was adopted as the official seal of the Town of Portland. Its design depicts the town of Portland’s history — the importance of brownstone quarrying and shipbuilding are evident in the brownstone cliffs, oxen pulling the brownstone arch in the quarry, and in the background, the masts of a schooner built in the Gildersleeve section of Portland.



COMING SOON:

Westerwald Pottery Portland Jar and Pitcher (see photo on page 8)

Two new pieces from Westerwald Pottery in Pennsylvania. Not familiar with their work? Since first creating pieces for the bicentennial of 1976, they have been producing pieces modeled after early Pennsylvania stoneware, inscribed with town names and embellished with a traditional colonial style decoration.

We will have both one-quart Jars and Pitchers in gray stoneware with blue cobalt decoration — Portland and the year of its incorporation 1841. (Similar to photo on page 8)

The beautiful handmade pitcher (approximately 8” tall) holds one quart of liquid, perfect for a small water or tea pitcher to be used at your next family gathering.

The traditional handmade jar (approximately 6” tall) fits into any room of your home. Use it to store utensils or to hold fresh flowers, for example.

Look no further for a unique and special housewarming or hostess gift idea! Each piece must be thrown, stamped, fired in a bisque kiln, cobalted, decorated, glazed and fired a second time.

Because every piece is handmade, no two products are exactly alike!



Westerwald Pottery Portland Jar and Pitcher
 Coming soon from the Ruth Callander Cupboard
 Available now - Portland Seal Cutting Board
 See page 7 for more information!

(President's Letter - Continued from page 1)
 all of the support we have received from the local community over the years.

This month, we contributed to the Portland Library's special anniversary event by working on an exhibit of notable Portland citizens and happenings during the year 1895 as the Portland Library celebrated its 125 years (plus two, due to Covid-19) of service to our community. We also noted the 120th birthday of our benefactor, Ruth Frisbie Ryan Callander, on June 9.

We now turn our attention to new projects as we prepare to re-open our museum to the public again. In the meantime, we have some exciting new items for sale in our Callander Cupboard gift shop. Check them out!

Happy summertime! Julie Macksoud

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July 2022 Newsletter!

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