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Amy Archer-Gilligan: Entrepreneurism Gone Wrong in Windsor

by Christine Ermenc, Executive Director

On May 14, 1916, the dedication ceremonies for the new St. Gabriel's Church took place on a lovely spring day. A standing-room-only crowd of over 1,000 attended the first services as bright sunlight filtered through the stained glass windows and illuminated the beautiful new altar. This was a positive day of celebration for the entire town, a town still reeling from the arrest of St. Gabriel's parishioner Amy Archer-Gilligan six days earlier on the charge of first-degree murder.

Archer-Gilligan, a diminutive widow with a teenaged daughter who, like many fellow parishioners, had contributed to the church building fund, ran a home for elderly people in town and was a regular church-goer. To many, it seemed inconceivable that she could be guilty of the charge of which she was accused. To others, the murder charge was the tip of an iceberg of crimes waiting to be uncovered.

Amy Archer-Gilligan was born in 1868 into modest circumstances to James and Mary Kennedy Duggan in Milton, Connecticut, the eighth of ten children. The family would be visited by mental illness; Amy's brother John became an inmate at the Connecticut General Hospital for the Insane in 1902, and one of her sisters is listed



The Archer Private Home for Elderly People Windsor Conn. postcard | WHS Collections 1960s. 2012.1.99

as residing there in the 1930 census. Amy Duggan married James Archer in 1897. By 1901, the Archers with their small daughter resided in Newington in the house of John Seymour, a frail gentleman whom they cared for in exchange for room and board. When Seymour died, the Archers rented the house from his heirs and turned it into Sister Amy's Nursing Home for the Elderly. In 1907, the Seymour family sold that home, and the Archers moved to Windsor, using their savings to purchase what became The Archer Home for Elderly People and Chronic Invalids on Prospect Street.

Today, there are over fifty thousand nursing homes and assisted living facilities across the United States,

but in the early 20th century, they were not common. Traditionally, care of the elderly had been the responsibility of family members when it was common to have many generations of one family living together. But by the early 20th century, multi-generational extended families were getting rarer as younger generations moved to places of greater economic opportunity. Town poor farms proliferated as communities were forced to assume responsibilities for eldercare. Increasingly, people began to fear becoming elderly, infirm, and a burden on their relatives. So the Archers were actually pioneers in eldercare.

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OUR MISSION

Windsor Historical Society invites people to connect with Windsor's evolving history by preserving, interpreting, and sharing our community's artifacts and stories.

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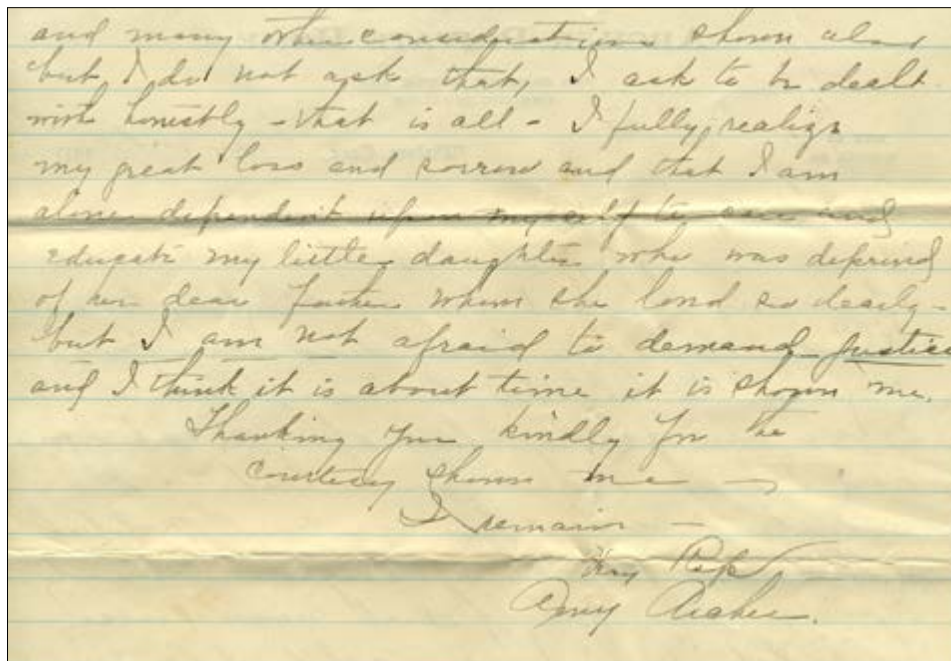
(Continued from page 1)

They had no problems filling their home with lodgers, or "inmates" as they were called then. The Archers advertised their services in the local newspapers and had postcards made up. Boarders could pay a weekly fee that ranged from \$7 to \$25, or they could opt for a \$1,000 life care option, and many chose the latter.

Eldercare outside the family was too new an enterprise for regulatory agencies to monitor quality of care, but in 1909 the McClintock family of West Hartford sued the Archers about the lack of care given to an elderly family member. That case was settled out of court with the Archers paying the McClintocks \$5,000, equivalent to \$133,000 in 2018 dollars. Then, in 1910, James Archer died, leaving Amy with their twelve-year-old daughter Mary to support, plus back taxes to pay. Mary, who was a musical child, would soon be enrolled as a day student at Windsor's Campbell School for Girls. During the 1912-13 calendar year, annual tuition and enrollment fees at the school came to \$410, with piano lessons at \$50 annually.

Windsor Historical Society's archival collections include a 1911 letter from Amy Archer to Windsor tax collector Howard L. Goslee in which she disputed back taxes. Archer noted that this was the first time she was hearing of these taxes, and that her husband had died. "I ask to be dealt with honestly – that is all – I fully realize my great loss and sorrow and that I am alone dependent upon myself to care and educate my little daughter who was deprived of her dear father whom she loved so dearly. But I am not afraid to demand justice, and I think it is about time that it is shown me."

Windsor in the early 20th century was a community poised for modernization and change. Its population more than doubled in fifty years, climbing from 2,783 in 1870, to over 5,600 by 1920. In 1910, the year Amy Archer lost her husband, the town budget for the following year was estimated at \$45,285. By 1913, town officials put the town budget for the coming year at \$92,465, citing the need for highways and the urgent need to address overburdened public schools. Increased expenses meant increased taxes.



Amy Archer Gilligan letter | WHS collections 1995.41.2.1, gift of Malcolm Goslee

Amy Archer continued to run her lodging house. Late in 1913, she married Michael Gilligan, a vigorous widower with family in town, shaving a few years off her age on the wedding license application. A few short months later, in February of 1914, the 56-year-old Mr. Gilligan was dead, having drawn up a will leaving his new wife his entire estate—in excess of \$4,000. This did not go over well with his family. Michael Gilligan's death certificate listed “valvular heart disease” as the primary cause of death, with a secondary cause: acute bilious attack.

Most of Amy Archer-Gilligan's lodgers were elderly and somewhat infirm, and many had no close family members living nearby. Franklin Andrews did not quite fit that profile. Sixty years old, he was somewhat crippled, but still healthy enough to do chores, yardwork, and errand-running for Mrs. Archer-Gilligan. He was close to his family and wrote often about his new life, mentioning the frequency of deaths in the home. In May of 1914, Andrews collapsed after a day spent outside, painting the fence around the property. Two days later, he was dead, cause of death listed as gastric ulcer. While cleaning out his things, his sister Nellie Pierce noticed some correspondence where Archer-Gilligan was pressing Andrews for money. She took her concerns to the state attorney, and to the *Hartford Courant*.

Hartford Courant correspondent and Windsor resident Carlan Goslee wrote obituaries for Windsor residents. For some years, Goslee had been troubled by the frequency of deaths in the Archer Home. True, many of the “inmates” were elderly, but Goslee was sufficiently disturbed to investigate the poison registers that every drugstore was required by law to keep. He found that Amy Archer-Gilligan had made multiple purchases of arsenic at H. H. Mason's drugstore in Windsor on the Broad Street Green, citing rat problems and bedbugs.

Prompted by all these concerns and complaints, *Hartford Courant* editor Clifford Sherman opened an investigation. Reporters reviewed years of Windsor death certificates, comparing death certificates of Archer Home residents with those of residents of the Jefferson Street Home for the Elderly in Hartford.

They found that between 1907 and 1916, sixty residents of the Archer Home died, twelve of them expiring between 1907 and 1910, forty-eight more perishing between 1911 and 1916, in a period when Amy Archer-Gilligan's finances were under stress. Looking at the latter five-year period, the number of deaths at the Jefferson Street Home in Hartford was similar, but the population there was seven times that of the Archer Home in Windsor. There was also a pattern emerging about the causes of death at the Archer Home: stomach pathologies and sudden deaths. It did not take a great leap of the imagination to get to poisoning. Revisiting the poison registers revealed that Archer-Gilligan had purchased ten ounces of arsenic just before Michael Gilligan's death—enough to kill over a hundred people.

This evidence was enough for a state police investigation. The bodies of several former residents of the Archer home were exhumed and examined. It was later testified that Franklin Andrews' stomach contained enough arsenic “to kill half a dozen strong men”. Amy Archer-Gilligan was arrested on May 8, 1916, and charged with the murder of Franklin Andrews and other residents of the home.

Archer-Gilligan's trial began in June of 1917. The case headlined in newspapers all over the country. Four weeks later, Amy Archer-Gilligan was convicted and sentenced to hang. She and her lawyers appealed that conviction, which was overturned. The second trial began in June of 1919. Archer-Gilligan pleaded insanity, was



Amy Archer Gilligan | Photo from Wikipedia

found guilty of second-degree murder, and sentenced to life imprisonment. In 1924, she was transferred to the Connecticut General Hospital for the Insane in Middletown, and there she remained until her death in 1962.

In 1917, the year of Archer-Gilligan's trial, Connecticut's state legislature introduced a bill requiring the licensing of “Old Folks Homes” with inspections and annual reports of death submitted to the State Board of Charities, in an effort to prevent anything like this from happening again. Some years later, a New Yorker named Joseph Kesselring, who had read about the case as a boy, decided to write a play. Kesselring came to Connecticut to examine newspaper accounts and old records, then wrote *Arsenic and Old Lace*, very roughly based on this case. It opened on Broadway in 1941 to a three-year run, followed by a Frank Capra movie starring Cary Grant.

This story has continued to capture the public imagination. The play is a staple of high school drama clubs and community theater groups to this day. Perhaps it is the shock value of a demure churchgoing widow raising a young child committing multiple murders before being discovered. Predators don't always look like predators. Perhaps it is because a century later, eldercare is still a societal challenge, despite more safeguards now in place.

Changing Streetscapes in Windsor. Poquonock Center

by Michelle Tom, Librarian/Archivist

The area in Poquonock just north of the bridge over the Farmington River was for decades a commercial center of the neighborhood. Starting in the mid-19th century,

the businesses here served the growing immigrant populations who arrived to work in the nearby mills and tobacco farms.



c1895-1900s. Trolleys started running through Poquonock to Rainbow in the 1890s. The store on the right, just north of River Street, was a general store built in 1848, and at the time of the photo was run by Lemuel R. Lord. WHS collections 2000.30.149, courtesy of Julius Rusavage.



1920s-30s. John Collins had taken over the general store during this time period, and he must have seen the last of the trolleys roll by in 1932 when trolley service to Rainbow ended. WHS collections 2010.39.72, gift of James Silliman.



Late 1930s. In 1924, John Collins gained some competition from the Poquonock Central Market across the street, built and run by Lithuanian immigrant John Griskewicz. After Collins left, another Lithuanian family, the Blazis, took over his store. WHS collections 2010.39.3, gift of James Silliman.



1956. In 1952, the town started work on replacing the bridge over the Farmington River in Poquonock, and in the process, several businesses in Poquonock Center were demolished, including the Blazis store and the hardware store next door. WHS collections 2000.30.191, courtesy of Julius Rusavage.

Windsor's Founders: Bray Rossiter, Man of Science, Man of Mischief

by Kristen Wands, Curator

Though many excellent reference works were used to write this piece, I am particularly indebted to the work of R.G. Tomlinson, who has written extensively about Dr. Rossiter's life and the autopsy.

Bray Rossiter (1610-1672), sometimes called Bryan, was born to a family of wealth and power. In England, the Rossiter family had a large manor house in the village of Combe St. Nicholas and extensive landholdings throughout Somerset. They participated in the international textile trade. Bray was well-educated and likely received some medical training before coming to New England. Bray traveled to Dorchester aboard the *Mary and John*, along with his father Edward, an influential Assistant of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and eleven other family members and servants. They arrived in May, 1630. The family were Puritans, but were also loyal to the royal family. Edward Rossiter died shortly after he arrived in Dochester. Bray's brother Nicholas returned to England to run the manor there, but Bray and his brother Hugh stayed. Bray married Elizabeth Alsop in 1635. Her father, the Reverend John Alsop, served as chaplain to the exiled Charles II during Cromwell's rule, cementing Rossiter's royalist ties.

Bray was part of the large group who left Dorchester for Windsor in the 1630s. His first home here flooded in 1638/9, at which point he moved closer to present day Union Street. He quickly made a name for himself in Windsor, becoming the first Town Clerk in 1639, a registrar, and surveyor. His skill as physician was approved by the magistrates

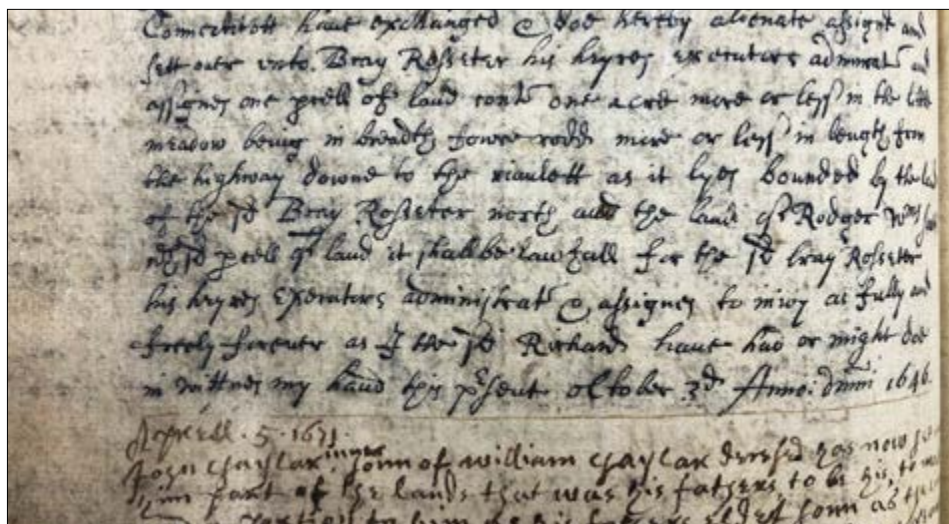
and recognized by the General Court. Rossiter also made a name for himself as a man who was frequently in court. While living in Windsor, he filed suits against the Widow Hudgison, Henry Wolcott, Nicholas Hoit, and Peter Tilton. Rossiter himself was sued by Henry Wolcott. His skill as a physician and leader, but also his litigiousness, caught the attention of the magistrates. It isn't known what prompted this action, but in June of 1650, the Particular Court records state:

*"Mr. Rosseter Acknowledgeth himselfe Bound to this Common wealth in a Recognisance of £20 and Mr. Mathew Allyn and Richard Lord in a Recognisance of £10 a peece that the said Mr. Rosseter Shall appeare at the next quarter Courte (if hee bee then liuinge in this Jurisdiction and Carrye good behauior in the meane while."*¹

In 1651, Rossiter moved to Guilford. As historian R.G. Tomlinson has noted, the move was a bit surprising, considering New Haven Colony was less liberal than Connecticut and was Separatist, in direct opposition to Rossiter's strong royalist leanings. Nonetheless, his services as a doctor were in great demand. Governor Leete actively recruited him. He was excused from the watch because he was a physician. Rossiter purchased the former estate of Samuel

Desborough, making him Governor Leete's next-door neighbor. As he had in Windsor, he worked as a surveyor, and was also a deacon. Rossiter assumed he would be excused from paying taxes because he was a physician, as he had been in Connecticut, but New Haven disagreed.

Again, Rossiter's litigious nature came to the surface. He became an agitator who believed that New Haven Colony should become part of Connecticut Colony. He worked to convince his neighbors that New Haven limited their rights as Englishmen, and that their taxes were unjust. Rossiter became a thorn in the side of Governor Leete. The two disagreed over who should be named the new minister of New Haven, and about a number of other issues. When Leete's wife became ill, he wrote to John Winthrop for help instead of Rossiter, his next door neighbor, saying that she required, *"more of [Winthrop's] phisick although she fearth it to have very contrary operation in Mr. Rossiter's stomach."*² By May of 1661, Rossiter was refusing to pay taxes to both Guilford and the New Haven Colony. When the marshal came to his farm to seize two cows, Rossiter hit him and his son threatened the marshal's men with an axe. The two



Bray Rossiter land record 1646 | Windsor Town Clerk

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were imprisoned. At their trial, in late May 1662, magistrates Wyllys and Allyn came from Hartford and convinced the Rossiters to sign a written apology. This did not prevent Rossiter from leading a party from Connecticut Colony to Guilford in protest, riding into town firing their guns into the air at 10 PM on December 30, 1663, waking the frightened townspeople. Troopers called from New Haven managed to keep the peace. Rossiter moved to Killingworth, but kept up his protests against New Haven until it finally joined Connecticut in 1664, at which point Rossiter returned to Guilford. He was granted 100 pounds for the difficulty his family had endured on condition that he not file any additional suits on the matter.

In the midst of all this trouble over taxation, on March 31, 1662, Bray Rossiter was called to Hartford to perform the first autopsy in Connecticut, on the body of eight-year-old Elizabeth Kelly, the event for which he has become best

known. Kelly had accused a neighbor, Goody Ayers, of bewitching her before her death. Rossiter did not see the body until several days after death, by which point rigor mortis had subsided and gravity had caused blood to pool in various parts of the body. These phenomena were both apparently unfamiliar to Rossiter. He believed they were signs of witchcraft. Judith Ayers was eventually put in jail, but escaped. She and her husband fled to Rhode Island, leaving two sons behind.

The Rossiters themselves were no strangers to tragedy. Seven or eight of Bray Rossiter's ten or eleven children were born in Windsor, five or six of these died here before the couple's 1651 move to Guilford. Then, in 1669, the couple's nine year old daughter Sarah, their last born, passed away as well. Rossiter's wife took this death particularly hard. In her grief, she refused to eat for ten days before she herself died, on August 29, 1669. Rossiter wrote to his daughter Johanna, saying

he mourned "the loss of a sweet companion that hath so long been a comforting companion in all my tribulation." Rossiter himself died on September 30, 1672 at 62 years old. Bray Rossiter was, as Governor Leete described him, "a man of turbulent, restless fractious spirit." He was also among the most respected physicians in the region at the time and a strong leader whom the Connecticut magistrates, at least, viewed as a sympathetic figure.³

Sources:

¹ *Records of the Particular Court of Connecticut 1639-1663*. Hartford, Connecticut: Connecticut Historical Society and the Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Connecticut, 1928, p. 85.

² Governor Leete to John Winthrop, quoted in Richard G. Tomlinson, "The Remarkable Dr. Rossiter" *The Connecticut Nutmegger*, December 2006, p. 346.

³ Governor Leete, complaint to Connecticut Colony, quoted in Alicia Crane Williams, *Early New England Families 1641-1700*, Vol. I. Boston, MA: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2015, p. 284.

Changing Times and Modern Biases

John Mooney

Education & Outreach Manager,

Over the past two years, I have led Windsor Historical Society's educational programming and have hosted fieldtrips for students ranging in grade from kindergarten through high school. Through these experiences, I have learned that we often fail to recognize just how quickly our world can completely transform without us realizing it. The students' preconceptions about history have also taught me that our own ideas about the past are probably characterized by our experiences in the modern world more than we would like to think.

After becoming familiar with a wide span of history and cultures, it's easy to forget that during our

formative years our knowledge of the world and even our local community is small and limited. When students tour the Society's Strong-Howard House, they marvel at the differences between home life in 1810 and the conveniences of modern living. One of the hardest concepts for students to grasp, even for those at grades beyond elementary school, is that the Howard family lived without electricity and all the appliances and contraptions that came with it. Even though we make it clear that there was no electricity available in 1810, students often have a difficult time disassociating the objects they see in the house from modern technologies available today. Typically, it's necessary to remind classes several times that innovations such as toasters, refrigerators, telephones, and, believe it or not, the internet did not exist in the 19th century. As tablets, cell phones, and social media

further encroach into all aspects of our lives, it's important to keep in mind that these newly developed high technologies, which to us are signifiers of a rapidly changing world, are to younger generations just timeless features of the world, as naturally inherent to society as running water or lightbulbs.

Seeing the initial difficulty students have in imagining the world prior to computers and electricity made me question what I take for granted about the past that could just be an impression based on my own experiences. What concepts and ideas have existed all throughout our lives, but were only introduced shortly before our time? Perhaps by recognizing the preconceptions that students carry, we can better understand and circumvent our own preconceptions which, despite our intentions, distort our views of history.

Volunteer Profile: Sandy Lifter McGraw

This issue's profile is also a fond farewell as Sandy has recently retired from her volunteering duties here at the Society. We want to thank her from the bottom of our hearts for her many years of dedicated service. We and the countless people she has helped with their genealogical research so appreciate the knowledge, effort, and humor that she brought to the library every week. It truly is a privilege and honor to work together to preserve and share Windsor's history.

How long have you volunteered for WHS?

I began around 2002, a year after retiring, and finished up projects I had been meaning to get to like wallpapering and sewing some curtains. I just needed some room to get used to another mode of lifestyle before delving into a new one.

What do you like most about volunteering here?

I liked the once-a-week routine, the projects I did, the friendly people I worked with, the several different tasks I learned about, like how to

attach photos to the proper Past Perfect profiles and some other types of records in the library. Some of the projects I did like, like the Trades and Professions of the Windsor Founders.

What connection do you have to Windsor history?

In researching my mother's side of my family tree, I found my Mills grandfather's line led back to two of the Founders of Windsor, the Gaylords and the Porters. I might have had three Founders if Peter Mills, known as "the Dutchman", had arrived in Windsor about 9 years earlier! I found the genealogy done by Helen Schatvet Ullmann who did much work for the NEHGS. She had only come up to my great-great-grandfather in her book so I contacted her and provided her with the Mills line from him to myself. She had thought my grandfather never had any children....hello!...my mother! He had never married my grandmother because he was legally married to a lady in Boston whom he had abandoned!

Do you have any advice for someone interested in volunteering but might be nervous about getting started?



Photo by Christina Vida.

I enjoyed my 16 years at Windsor Historical Society ...until age caught up with me! Anyone who is interested in history can become a volunteer and work with many different people who come into the library to do research on many kinds of subjects pertaining to Windsor history. One can get a feeling of fulfillment knowing they helped someone find some needed information and from the enjoyment of meeting people from all over the nation and perhaps even the world!

Many thanks to our volunteers

We are so grateful to all our volunteers. Between our volunteers, staff, and donors, we are able to accomplish so much more and even surprise ourselves!

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Admission is free to browse the museum store, the *450 Years of Windsor Stories* galleries, and the Hands-On-History Learning Center.

Wednesdays - Saturdays
11 AM - 4:00 PM
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Tours of Historic Houses
11 AM & 1 PM

Tours & Library Admission
\$8 Adults
\$6 Seniors & Students
FREE for children under 12 and WHS members

Can't make it to the Society in person? For in-depth research resources, check out our website, windsorhistoricalsociety.org

Upcoming events

For more information contact the Society at 860-688-3813 or info@windsorhistoricalsociety.org

September 13, 7 PM to 8 PM **DNA & Your Family Tree with Genealogist Jennifer Zinck**

Learn about three types of DNA most commonly used for genealogy and how each helps you discover family history. Explore direct-to-consumer DNA testing companies and common testing strategies ensuring that genealogists get the most out of their DNA testing budget. We will also discuss the most successful methods for contacting and collaborating with DNA matches.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 WHS members

September 25, 7 PM to 8 PM **Exploring Your AncestryDNA Results with Jennifer Zinck**

Once results come in from DNA testing, many don't know what to do with all the names and numbers. Zinck will explore the information provided in AncestryDNA results, discuss methods to manipulate the results, and introduce third-party tools that maximize the use of DNA as a tool for genealogy.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 WHS members

October 4, 5:30 PM to 7 PM **First Thursdays Genealogy Support Group**

Just starting out? Experienced but stumped? Want access to Ancestry.com? Join others for discussion and problem-solving. *Free*

October 10, 7 PM to 8 PM **Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918-1919 and Implications for the Next Pandemic**

With Connecticut State Epidemiologist Dr. Matthew Carter. World War I killed 17 million people. The epidemic that started in the war's final year infected 500 million and may have killed 50-100 million (up to 5% of the global population). Both events forever

changed world history, politics, and human life.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 WHS members

October 20, Noon to 4 PM **2nd Great Windsor History Hunt**

Pick up your book of clues at the Society, your passport to discovering a fascinating array of historic sites in town and a little history along the way. Once you have found each site, snap a picture. When finished, return to the Society to have your photos checked. If you found all the sites, place yourself in a drawing for the prize of your choice! Refreshments and prizes awarded from 3 – 4 pm. For all ages; families encouraged.

\$10 per carload, \$5 per individual

October 30, 5:30 PM to 7:30 PM **Exhibit Opening: Christopher Miner Spencer, An Inventive Mind**

Christopher Spencer, who raised his family in Windsor, is known for his famed Spencer Repeating Rifle, automatic screw machine, automobiles, and boats. Enjoy refreshments with us and at 6 pm, Curator Kristen Wands will read from Vesta Spencer Taylor's personal reminiscences about her father.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors, FREE to WHS members

November 1, 5:30 PM to 7 PM **First Thursdays Genealogy Support Group**

Just starting out? Experienced but stumped? Want access to Ancestry.com? Join others for discussion and problem-solving. *Free*

November 11, 2 PM to 3 PM **Palisado Cemetery Tour with Emphasis on World War I**

On the 100th anniversary of the ending of World War I, discover compelling stories of Windsor men and women who served in the armed forces and on Windsor's home-front with Society Director Christine Ermenc.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 WHS members

November 17, 6 PM to 9 PM **Windsor Historical Society's Festive Pre-Holiday Auction**

At The Lodge on Deerfield Road. Provides the perfect opportunity to find great holiday gifts and getaways for someone you love, sponsor free admission to the Society, or make the holidays special for a Windsor family in need! Tickets are \$40 in advance, \$45 on auction night, and cover a delicious buffet dinner, beer, and wine.

To purchase your tickets or offer an auction donation, call 860-688-3813 or email info@windsorhistoricalsociety.org.

December 1, 11 AM to 2 PM **Gingerbread House Cookie Decorating and Holiday Recipe Sharing**

We'll supply cookies, frostings, and all manner of decorations. Bring a holiday recipe to share and learn a bit about holiday traditions as you work.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 WHS members

December 6, 5:30 PM to 7 PM **First Thursdays Genealogy Support Group**

Just starting out? Experienced but stumped? Want access to Ancestry.com? Join others for discussion and problem-solving. *Free*

December 7, 6 PM to 8 PM **Historic Libations: Ciders (Hard and Sweet)**

Sample a variety of delicious hard ciders and a hot mulled sweet cider as Society staffers John Mooney and Michelle Tom share some fascinating facts of apple and cider history in Windsor, from the time of Henry Wolcott's large apple orchard in the early 17th century to the present day popularity of hard cider varieties.

21-and-over program \$15 adults, \$14 members

If you love the work we do, please think about leaving us a gift in your estate plan, such as a bequest in your will.