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| <p>PAGE 2 Director's Message <i>by Christine Ermenc</i> Unexpected Uses</p> | <p>PAGE 4 & 5 Windsor Founder Series: Jonathan Brewster <i>by Kristen Wetzel Wands</i> Part 6 of our Founder Series</p> | <p>PAGE 6 Changing Streetscapes <i>by Michelle Tom</i> Deckers Brook in Wilson</p> | <p>PAGE 7 Volunteer Profile: Barbara Tanguay Education & Visitors' Desk</p> |
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Christopher Spencer at age 80, 1913 | WHS collections

Christopher Miner Spencer

by Kristen Wands, Curator

*To learn more about Spencer, his inventions, and his family life in Windsor, please visit our exhibit: **Christopher Miner Spencer: An Inventive Mind**, on view in the museum's meeting room through the winter.*

Christopher Miner Spencer was born in Manchester, CT and died in Hartford, but he spent the bulk of his adult life right here in Windsor.

Here, in a home on Orchard Street, he raised his family, put down roots, and perfected many of his notable inventions. Spencer was an almost compulsive inventor and tinkerer, from his childhood into his old age. The people who knew him best describe long hours of puzzling over problems he hoped to solve and designs he hoped to improve—either ones he marketed, like his rifles and automatic screw machine, or those for private use, like his steam-powered boat and automobiles. They also describe a man who was kind, generous, and friendly.

+Christopher was born on June 20, 1833, to Ogden and Asenath Hollister Spencer. When he was 11, Christopher went to live with his grandfather, Josiah Hollister, who encouraged his inventor's spirit by allowing him to use his lathe as well as to modify his old Revolutionary War musket. Little did Josiah know then what an important role firearms design would play in Christopher's future work.

Spencer began working for the Cheney Brothers at their silk mill in Manchester when he was 14, later becoming their machine shop apprentice in 1850. Spencer wrote that it was at the Cheney's mill that he "first became imbued with the idea of becoming a mechanic."¹ Frank Cheney gave Spencer the

opportunity to experiment in making machinery for the mill. Between 1853 and 1855, Spencer set out to learn more about shop methods, manufacturing machine tools and working in repair shops for the New York Central Railroad in Rochester, at the Ames Works in Chicopee, MA, and at Colt's Armory in Hartford. He returned to Cheney's Mill in 1855, becoming superintendent of their machine shop. At this time, he earned his first patent, for an automatic silk winding machine, which reduced the number of mill girls needed to operate the spool winders. The Cheney's also encouraged Spencer's development of a repeating rifle, allowing him the use of their machinery for that purpose in his free time. He obtained a patent for it in March of 1860.

Following the Civil War, Spencer and Charles E. Billings formed the Billings & Spencer Company, manufacturing sewing machine shuttles and drop forgings. He obtained another patent at this time, for a machine that automated the turning of spindles and bobbin heads used in sewing machine construction. This invention led to another patent, for his automatic turret screw machine, which in turn led to the formation of another business, The Hartford Machine Screw Company.

Spencer's screw machine was an improvement upon the turret lathe with the addition of cutting tools attached to rotating cams. It

(Continued on page 3)

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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Unexpected Uses

One of the jewels in our museum campus is our research library. In fact, most visitors who are not here because of a school tour or a public program drop in to use the library. Autumn is a particularly busy time for us as visitors from all over the country come to experience the brilliant colors of a New England fall, explore their family roots, and share some of their excitement with our friendly volunteers and staff. Other times, new homeowners come to research the history of the home or property they have just bought. And sometimes, we find that we can help with requests that are a bit more unusual.



Photo by George Petro

Recently, one of our members came to us because he had been asked by family members to deliver the eulogy for a friend whom he'd interviewed as part of an oral history project for the Society a decade ago. He was honored to be asked, but nervous,

wanting to do justice to the life of his friend for his friend's family. Librarian/Archivist Michelle Tom quickly found the transcript of the oral history interview and the audio recording. Having the interview allowed our member to share perspectives on the life of his friend that were deeply moving to family members. We sent the transcript of the oral history interview on to several of them.

One Saturday when I was working, a young woman came into the library with some trepidation. She had come to Windsor to visit her birth mother for the first time, and hoped we had materials that could give her perspective on her birth mother's life before they met. We have an almost complete run of twentieth century Windsor High School yearbooks. This young woman found her birth mother in her high school yearbook along with clues about her interests: the clubs she had belonged to, a phrase she'd chosen to accompany her yearbook photograph. Decades-old town reports contained photographs of the family home, and clues about what Windsor had been like as a town to grow up in. We talked a little about questions she might ask her birth mother. When she left, she thanked me and our library volunteer profusely and said she felt much more comfortable about the visit to come.

You never know who might benefit from a high school yearbook, a photo, some town reports, an oral history interview transcript. It is our purpose and our privilege to preserve these things to share.

Christie

(Continued from page 1)

enabled rapid production of metal parts, notably screws, with minimal operator involvement, and far less operator skill than previous methods. His Double Turret Automatic Screw Machine, developed later, allowed cuts made to the part of the screw that would normally be held by the chuck (a type of clamp). Spencer patented his first automatic screw machine in 1873 and continued working on improvements to this technology until his death in 1922, until that point working as a consultant to the New Britain Machine Co.

Spencer's true passion, however, remained the improvement of firearms. In 1882, he patented the Spencer Repeating Shotgun, and soon formed the Spencer Arms Company, with its factory located in Windsor. The shotgun was a hit with sportsmen due to its innovative slide action, but a financial failure, so the patent rights were sold. Spencer returned his attention to the automatic screw machine, which, of all Spencer's inventions, was arguably the most important. It was this machine that many have credited with changing the face of manufacturing.

In the midst of all of his professional work, Spencer had time to devote his mental energies to inventions related to several hobbies, including steam-powered automobiles and boats. In a lecture delivered at the first meeting of the Windsor Historical Society in September 1922, his daughter Vesta wrote, "As early as 1862 he successfully operated a steam wagon in Manchester & in Boston and used it in going to & from his work...The earlier model had been, of course, coal burning, but those built in 1902-1908 used kerosene for fuel and were the forerunners of the steam towing cars of today." Our Historical Society holds several automobile registration certificates issued to Spencer for his home-made automobiles which

illustrate the shift from steam power to the combustion engine. Spencer's youngest son, Percival, later created his own "steam wagon," which he drove here in Windsor as a youngster.

Of his steam-powered boats, Vesta wrote in the same 1922 lecture, "As early as the '70s the beauties of the Connecticut and the Farmington Rivers beckoned to him, and he applied steam to a boat only 12 feet long which held but 2 persons and was known to riversiders as the 'Fiddlebox.' ...This boat was supplanted in father's interest and affections by the steamer *Luzette* which has been in commission nearly every year since 1884...during the long summer days Father's greatest enjoyment was sharing with neighbors and friends the delights of a sail down the picturesque Connecticut or cruising on Long Island Sound." Spencer's children seemed to enjoy the time they spent with their father on the *Luzette*.

Christopher Spencer was acutely aware of the obsessive mental energy his work demanded. A poem he wrote and delivered at a banquet for the New Britain Company in 1917, titled "The Inventor" is excerpted below:

*Month after month passes,
year after year;
Thinking, Thinking, Thinking;
Jeered at and ridiculed,
thought of as "queer";
Thinking, Thinking, Thinking.*

Perhaps Spencer's contemporaries ridiculed him, but history has proven the importance of his designs. All that thinking was worth it.

At the end of his life, Christopher Miner Spencer lived in Hartford. In the 1920 census, at age 86, Spencer was still listed as a working engineer. When he died in 1922, he was buried in Windsor's Palisado Cemetery, alongside his wife and children.

Spencer's children, particularly his sons, were deeply influenced by



Roger, Georgette, and Vesta Spencer in Spencer-made car | WHS Collection 1953.12.3.1

their father's inventive spirit and his work. Roger operated an automobile dealership on Main Street in Hartford around 1913, where he sold Kissel Kars, automobiles praised for their beautiful lines and roomy interiors. In the late 1920s, he won several races in his boat, the *Spencer Spec*, which was powered by an outboard motor. He later worked for Pratt and Whitney in West Hartford and then the Republican Aviation Company of Amityville, New York, and continued his work with automobiles in both of those locations as well before retiring in St. Petersburg, Florida.

Spencer's youngest son Percival's primary interest was in aviation, which his father encouraged. His first flight was in a self-built glider in 1911. He was best known for his work with amphibious aircraft and was well known for designing *The Republic Sea-Bee* and the *Spencer Amphibian Air Car*. Of his father, Percival wrote, "His faith in me must have been extra-ordinary, for how many fathers encourage a ten-year-old boy to build a hang glider, then see him graduate to a water-borne glider (to be towed behind the fishing boat by his older brother), and finally purchase an airplane engine

(Continued on page 4)



Christopher and Percival Spencer with an automobile in front of their Orchard Street home, c. 1909 | WHS collections 2018.1.281

so that he could make and fly an aircraft?"² Their sister Vesta believed her brothers had inherited their father's "mechanical mind."³

Christopher Miner Spencer has long captured the imagination of Americans, particularly firearms enthusiasts. He embodies the ideal of ingenuity, constantly tinkering and reworking designs to solve problems and improve upon his previous ideas. His inventions, particularly his automatic screw machine, changed the face of American industry. What his children remembered, however, was his generosity of spirit and unyielding faith in their abilities. They carried on his legacy of innovation.

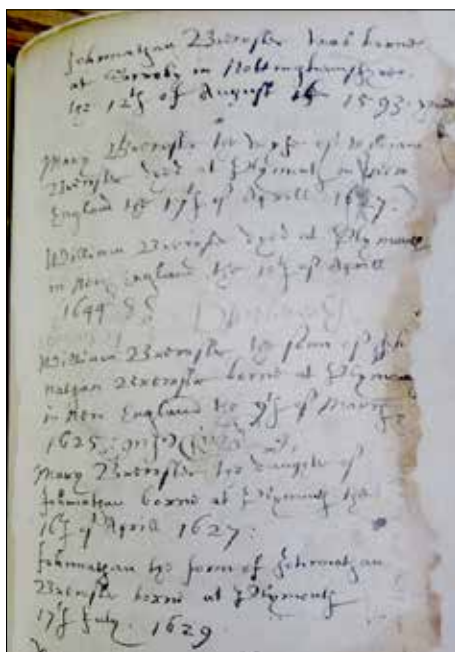
¹ Letter from Christopher Miner Spencer to Miss Cheney, Windsor, CT, March 21, 1904, Windsor Historical Society Collection.

² Quoted in preface to Roy M. Marcot, *Spencer Repeating Firearms*, Livonia, New York: R&R Books, 1990.

³ Vesta Spencer Taylor manuscript from September, 1922 Lecture, Windsor Historical Society Collection.

Windsor's Founders: Jonathan Brewster, Adventurer and Alchemist

by Kristen Wands, Curator



Windsor founder Jonathan Brewster's time in our town was brief, but pivotal. He was appointed Plymouth Colony's resident agent here, arriving some months (or years) prior to July of 1635, when he penned a letter to Governor William Bradford, expressing his concern over the influx of newcomers into the fledgling settlement. He wrote, "Ye Massachusetts men are coming almost dayly...some have a great mind to ye place we are upon, and which was last bought...I shall doe what I can to withstand them."¹ Bradford wrote begrudgingly that in the end, "for peace sake", Plymouth sold all but 1/16th of its Windsor holdings to the Dorchester group in May of 1637. Plymouth retained the trading house, some land around the house, plus some land near New-Towne (now Hartford). Jonathan Brewster was among

the signers of this agreement. It was also from Windsor, in June of 1636, that Brewster wrote to John Winthrop, Jr., warning that, "the Pequents have some mistrust that the English will shortly come against them."² This message portended the Pequot War, which in part was sparked by the death of Brewster's own brother-in-law, John Oldham. Later in 1636, Brewster was back in Plymouth Colony, and by 1637 was a commissioner in the Pequot War.

Jonathan Brewster was the eldest son of Plymouth Plantation leading light William Brewster. Born at Scrooby, Nottinghamshire on August 12, 1593, Jonathan moved with the family to Leiden, Holland when they fled there in 1608 seeking religious freedom. In Holland, Jonathan became a merchant and ribbon weaver who exported his wares to England. When his

A page from the "Brewster Book," containing some of the family birth and death records for William and Mary Brewster and their children | Photo courtesy of mayflowerhistory.com



The remains of Scrooby Manor, where Jonathan Brewster was born | photo courtesy of pilgrimfathersorigins.org

parents and brothers Love and Wrestling boarded the *Mayflower* in 1620, Jonathan stayed behind. Jonathan was one of what Bradford called the “lusty yonge men” who arrived at Cape Cod aboard the ship *Fortune* in November of 1621.³ In 1624, in Plymouth, he married Lucretia Oldham. They moved to Duxbury about 1630, becoming quite prominent there. Brewster was a trader, working up and down the coast as far south as Virginia. His subsequent appointment by Governor Bradford as resident agent at Windsor showed confidence in his leadership abilities. After his time in Windsor, he returned to Duxbury, eventually selling his landholdings there in settlement of debts to his business partners Mr. John Holland and Mr. Hopestill Foster. Afterward, about 1649, he settled in New London, soon establishing his trading post on Brewster’s Neck, along the Thames River, on land granted him by Mohegan sachem Uncas. The area is now part of Preston, Connecticut. The trading post opened without the permission of the Connecticut magistrates, causing Brewster a bit of trouble in the courts before the post was confirmed. He continued there for the remainder of his life. During his time in Windsor, Brewster began corresponding with John Winthrop, Jr., with whom he shared an interest in alchemy. Brewster had an alchemical laboratory in his home

at Brewster’s Neck. In 1656, he believed he was close to discovering the universal cure, a common goal among alchemists. He shared the progress of his experiments with Winthrop, saying, “I feare I shall not live to see it finished, in regard partly of the Indianes, who I feare will raise warres; and also I have a conceite that God sees me not worthy of a blessing by reason of my manifold miscariadges.” Brewster worried not only that his life might be in jeopardy, but also that some accident would upset his experiments, which needed to sit undisturbed for years at a time. Typically Puritan, he worried that he was not Christian enough to receive the divine alchemical secrets he sought. Writing that he trusted Winthrop with his research more than his own children, Brewster promised he would “shortly write all the whole worke in few words, plainly ... & sealle it vp in a littel box, & subscribe it to your selfe... that if it please God I should suddainly be taken away, you may call for it.”⁴ Ultimately, it appears Brewster’s experiments were unsuccessful. His letters to Winthrop, however, provide a fascinating window into the minds of our New England forefathers.⁵

While Jonathan Brewster’s encounters with Native Americans do not seem to have affected his alchemy, later events suggest he

was right to be nervous about his family’s safety. In early March of 1659, while Brewster was away in Hartford, “12 [Narragansett] Indians came suddainly out of the bushes” surrounding Brewster’s farm, and ran toward Mrs. Brewster, who was working in a field with one Mohegan and two English servants. Seemingly to shield her from the attack, the Mohegan ran toward “Mrs. Brewster, and held fast about hir, the other Indians pulled him by force from hir and presently killed him and cutt of his hand and fledd away.”⁶ Apparently, the Narragansetts were upset that Brewster had been supplying his Mohegan allies with firearms, and the attack, which resulted in the death of the Mohegan servant, was in retaliation. Though no member of Brewster’s family was physically harmed, the incident was a tremendous fright to all of the English settlers in the region.

When Brewster’s death came, it was the result of an illness rather than an act of violence. He passed away in August of 1659, at 66 years of age. He was buried in Brewster’s Neck Cemetery, which is all that remains of the family’s home and trading post there. Both Windsor and New London owe a debt to Brewster for his role in the settlement of our towns.

¹ Quoted in William Bradford Bradford’s “History Of Plimoth Plantation” From the Original Manuscript. Boston: Wright & Potter Printing CO., 1899 (hereinafter Bradford’s History), p. 403.

² *The Winthrop Papers*, Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1865, (hereinafter *Winthrop Papers 1865*) p. 68.

³ *Bradford’s History*, p. 128.

⁴ *Winthrop Papers 1865*, p. 79.

⁵ A more in-depth discussion of Brewster’s letters to Winthrop can be found in Walter W. Woodward, *Prospero’s America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

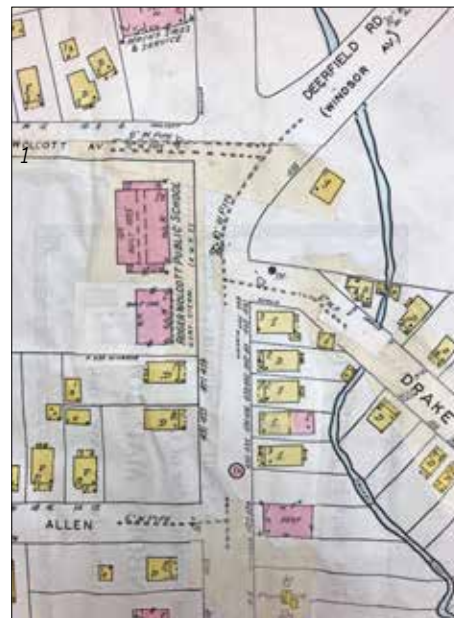
⁶ The incident was related by CT governor Welles to Governor Winthrop in a letter published in *The Winthrop Papers*. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1882, p. 54.



Changes in Cityscape: Deckers Brook in Wilson

by Michelle Tom, Librarian/Archivist

A large, grassy lot now sits adjacent to Windsor Avenue across from Allen and E. Wolcott Streets in Windsor. But at one time, it was one of the most popular areas in the Wilson neighborhood.



1. This Sanborn insurance map, produced in 1927 and updated in 1947, shows our block—six buildings along the east side of Windsor Ave., south of where Drake Street used to intersect. Among the stores here over the years were the Wilson Beauty Parlor, The Great A&P Tea Company, First National, and Bloom's Grocery and Package stores. Deckers Brook flows behind the buildings and under the roads. WHS collections 2018.48.1 Gift of MaryLou Peters.



2. Constable Maurice Kennedy views the scene sometime in the 1920s-early 1930s. We're looking north towards where Deerfield Road curves off to the right. The Brewer Chevrolet dealership lies where Windsor Ave. will be extended and straightened in 1941. 1954.2.4.195 | photo by William S. Leek.



3. 1952. Onlookers gawk at a car accident that had just occurred in front of PX Restaurant. In the center of the photo stands the Polish National Home, established in 1945 as "a community and cultural center for the more than 1,000 Windsor residents of Polish heritage," according to the Hartford Courant. 2000.30.224, detail | Photo courtesy of Julius Rusavage.

4. 1964. The Sinick family opened the Wilson General Department Store at 436 Windsor Avenue in 1933. The store originally sold chicken feed and other agricultural products, but soon carried hardware, toys, clothes, and anything else you could think of. Sid Sinick, the son of the original owner, ran the store through the 1970s. He enjoyed talking to passersby as he swept the sidewalk outside his store. 2000.30.255. | Photo courtesy of Julius Rusavage.

5. 1979. Looking southwest. In 1978, the town bought the buildings in this block and demolished them as part of a large improvement project to alleviate persistent flooding from the nearby Deckers Brook. 1998.12.1.479 Photo by Adelbert Coe.

Volunteer Profile: Barbara Tanguay

In this column, we are featuring one of the invaluable education volunteers who make it possible for us to host our various field trips and education-based programs. It is a privilege and honor to work together with all of our education volunteers to share Windsor's history with students throughout the region.

How long have you volunteered for WHS?

About 8 years. I started volunteering at the same time that Christina Vida (the Society's last educator) was hired.

What initially attracted you to becoming an educational volunteer?

When my children were in elementary school I enjoyed helping out in their classrooms. I thought being an education volunteer would be a good way to continue helping others now that my children have grown up.

What do you like most about volunteering for field trips at WHS?

I enjoy meeting the students and teachers. With each field trip I learn something new. Sometimes it's historical, but usually it's more about pop culture. For instance a recent group of fifth graders taught me about the video game *Fortnite*!

What is the most memorable question a student has asked you during a fieldtrip?

It wasn't actually a question, but one eighth grade girl told me she would not have wanted to live in colonial times, but if she had to have lived back then she would have wanted "to be an Indian and run around naked!" I told the student that the Native American women did wear clothes, (otherwise they would be quite cold!) although their clothes were not as cumbersome as the clothes the colonial women wore.



Photo by Michelle Tom.

Do you have any advice for someone interested in becoming an education volunteer?

Just do it! The field trips are well planned. There are detailed lesson plans that are easy to follow, so you don't need a teaching background to volunteer. You will learn interesting facts about Windsor. You will also find that Windsor schools have some wonderful students – intelligent, respectful, and eager to learn!

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!

COLLECTIONS

Dorothy Ball, Donna Baron, Marianne Curling, Kevin Ferrigno, and Karen Parsons

EDUCATION

Ann Beaudin, Liz Burke, Eileen Curley, Cindy Daniels, Carolyn Doyle, Mary Kelling, Judy Locker, Marsha Mason, Roberta Merrigan, Donna Myers, Barbara Tanguay, and Jim Trocchi

FRONT DESK AND ADMINISTRATION

Lea Chayes, Pat Congelosi, Deb Dusseault, Bill Harris, Rob Hoskin, Betsy & Gordon Kenneson, Marsha Mason, Donna Myers, Ed Paquette, Ellye Rosenberg, Nanci Scully, Barbara Tanguay, Laura Toal, Jim Trocchi, and Dawn Whitney

GROUNDS

Ruth Fahrback, Becky Hendricks, Gordon Kenneson, the Town of Windsor, and Windsor Garden Club

LIBRARY

Ken Anderson, Elaine Brophy, Rob Hoskin, Anna Schofer

PUBLICITY

William Harris, Betsy and Gordon Kenneson, the Windsor Historical Society Board of Directors

Visit us

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
closed on major holidays

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. Visit our website and pay for events online: windsorhistoricalsociety.org/events

January 17, 7 PM to 8 PM

Connecticut River from the Air

An armchair tour with historian Jerry Roberts. Fascinating aerial images from source to sea.

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

Snow date: January 18

February 1, 6 PM to 8 PM

Beer and Tavern Games Night

Sample great beers from local brewing companies while learning about tavern life and playing some old-fashioned tavern games. Age 21 and up only.

\$12 for adults, \$10 WHS members

Snow date: February 2

February 7, March 7, April 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*

February 12, 7 PM to 8 PM

The Long Journeys Home: The Repatriations of Henry Opukaha'ia and Albert Afraid of Hawk

Emeritus Connecticut State Archaeologist Nick Bellantoni shares the fascinating and moving stories of these two young men from the Hawaiian and Lakota Nations who died in Connecticut almost a century apart.

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

Snow date: February 13

February 18, 10 AM to 4 PM

Presidents' Day Candle Dipping for All Ages

Dip your own candle, use engineering skills to build toothpick-and-marshmallow structures, and enjoy the Hands-On-History Learning Center.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 children, \$3 WHS members, or \$12 per family

Snow date: February 19

March 5, 11 AM to 2 PM

Education Volunteer Training at Windsor Historical Society

Love kids and teaching? Want to volunteer when it fits your schedule? Learn more about our popular school field trip programs, and see what we do with students in our galleries, historic homes, and in our historic neighborhood. Lesson plans provided. Bring a bag lunch and we'll provide coffee and dessert.

Free. Snow date: March 6

March 16, 2 PM to 3 PM

Evelyn Longman Batchelder's Life and Work with Liz Burke

Learn how Batchelder became the first woman to gain full membership in the National Academy of Design and the wife of the headmaster of the Loomis Institute. See sculpture that tells her story of love, duty, feminism, and triumph over great odds.

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

Snow date: March 17

March 23, 10 AM to 11 AM

All Aboard: Trains for Kids with Bob Bell

Enjoy Thomas videos and train tables, learn secret train whistle codes, make an engineer's hat, and take a whistle home.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 children, \$3 WHS members, or \$12 per family

Snow date: March 24, 2 PM to 3 PM

April 11, 7 PM to 9 PM

Seventh Annual Shad Derby Trivia Contest

Think you know everything? Test your knowledge at the Shad Derby Trivia Contest. Teams of up to 6 members (age 21 & up only) can compete. Enjoy refreshments along with friendly competition. Teams must register in advance – space is limited.

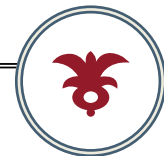
\$10 contestants, \$5 onlookers

April 17, 7 PM to 8 PM

Our Region: The Silicon Valley of the 19th Century with Bill Hosley

See the Society's exhibit on Christopher Miner Spencer and learn how the Connecticut Valley became America's first high-tech industrial corridor, producing guns, typewriters, sewing machines, bicycles, automobiles, and more.

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



If you love the work we do, please talk with your legal and financial advisors about leaving us a gift in your estate plan such as a bequest of cash or securities in your will.

What your legal and financial advisors will need to know:

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