



The Middler

NEWSLETTER of the SOCIETY of MIDDLETOWN FIRST SETTLERS DESCENDANTS
CONNECTICUT, U.S.A.

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Spring 2014

GENEALOGY... and STUFF

Finding meaning in the material objects of life: Middletown 'stuff' enriches local & family history

*'Stuff' helps tell a story,
even if that 'stuff' is not
your own family heirloom*

By R.W. Bacon
Editor, *The Middler*

Many genealogy-oriented readers of *The Middler* are familiar with the editor's encouragement of exploring family history through other means than name-and-date data. Tromping through graveyards, exploring migration routes, poking through 17th-century museum houses, and hiking ancestral fields and forests provide context and add to our understanding of those who came before us.

This article approaches the subject from still another angle – material objects. Many of us are fortunate to have some cherished family heirlooms. Maybe we have some furniture, a few tools, a watch, or jewelry. Some may have none, and some may have a houseful – or a house. But it is rare to have family objects that extend back more than 150 years or so. (Just as with our own health and fitness, the

preservation of artifacts made of organic material is an exercise in “managed decay.”) But that doesn't mean we can't learn something from the study of three-dimensional material objects that are not held under our own roof. This article explores resources that can help family historians do just that: a selection of articles, books, exhibitions, museums, and sources for collecting and experiencing material objects.

Tompkins Family exhibition.

A fine example of the intersection of material objects and family history was presented in a 2006 article in *New England Ancestors* magazine, a publication of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, entitled “Preserving Family History: The

continued on page 4



The carved chest above, dated to about 1680, was owned Middletown resident Elisha Curtis Brewster (1791-1881), born in Middletown, and passed down from his father, Elisha Brewster (1751-1798), born in Wethersfield. The carved chest is attributed to Wethersfield cabinetmaker Peter Blin or his apprentices. It sold at auction in 2011 for \$56,250.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Membership growth, Facebook networking, and new Middletown Settler DNA Project

By Marge Pierson
President, SMFSD

Our society membership continues to grow. Thanks to our hard-working registrar Hal Whitmore and his recruitment of Wetmore cousins, we welcomed 24 new members in 2013. More have joined us this spring.

If you use are a Facebook user or a would-be user, you may wish to join the SMFSD Facebook page. For access, contact Cindy Nicewarner by e-mail at cnicewarner@verizon.net.

It was on this page that we first heard of the DNA project that SMFSD member Peter Irvine has set up to discover or confirm the cousinly relationships many of us share. While this project is Peter's own idea rather than SMFSD-initiated, the board has voted to encourage him to continue to explore the possibilities and to ask members who have already taken genealogical DNA tests to offer their results with Peter. More data will help

continued on page 7

In this issue . . .

Material Objects and Genealogy: Stuff Helps Tell the Story	1
From the President: Membership Growth, Facebook, & DNA	1
Member Notes & SMFSD News	2
<i>Family Trees</i> by Francois Weil: A History of Genealogy in the U.S.	3
Wilcox Island: What's the History?	10
Membership Information	11



SMFSD NEWS

New members and new initiatives; advance plans and good news

• **Welcome new members.** SMFSD welcomes five new members since the last issue of *The Middler*: **Cynthia Demers**, ASM-345, Amston, Conn.; **John D. Fallon, Jr.**, LM-344, Bayonne, N.J. (1st settlers James Wright and George Hubbard); **David John Kelsey, Sr.**, LM-343, Palm Coast, Fla. (1st settler Daniel Harris); **John Frederick Rogers**, AM-342, Anchorage, Alaska (1st settler George Hubbard); and **Kevin Jess Wetmore III**, J-341, Los Angeles, Calif. (1st settler Thomas Wetmore). Junior member Kevin has a good start on being a true “life member,” as his membership began on the day of his birth on Nov, 14, 2013.

• **SMFSD board supports DNA study group for descendants of early Middletown families.** See the president’s message elsewhere in *The Middler* for more information.

• **SMFSD volunteer to moderate online discussion board.** SMFSD member Peter Irvine of Homewood, Ill. has volunteered to monitor and “direct traffic” on the discussion board accessible via the SMFSD website. His proposal was approved by the board of directors on May 5, 2014. Peter’s initiative will mean more expedient and informative responses to inquiries, and perhaps even encourage more traffic.

• **SMFSD already scheduled to exhibit at NERGC in 2015.** SMFSD

will once again have a presence at the New England Regional Genealogical Conference, this time in Providence, R.I., April 14-19, 2015.

• **Indian Hill Cemetery chapel restoration.** An April 19, 2014 article in the *Hartford Courant* announced a \$200,000 grant from the state’s Historic Preservation Office for the restoration of the 1867 brown-stone chapel at Middletown’s Indian Hill Cemetery. The 45-acre cemetery was established in 1850 on the site of a Native American burial ground, and is the final resting place for thousands of 19th- and 20th-century descendants of Middletown’s earliest families.

• **SMFSD Facebook presence.** You can keep up with SMFSD and network with others on our public Facebook page maintained by our secretary **Cindy Nicewarner**, at <https://www.facebook.com/SocietyofMiddletownFirstSettlersDescendants>. ■



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HUMAN FALLIBILITY DEPT. Correspondent helps your confused editor fix a 35-year mistake

By R.W. Bacon
Editor, *The Middler*

In the spring 2012 issue of *The Middler*, I wrote an article based on my own experiences, sharing how Middletown local and family history study led to a dozen unanticipated intersections with a 7th cousin/3x removed who died in 2000, but whom I never had the pleasure of knowing.

Referenced in the article were Bacon family homes on Newfield Street upon land of the 1670 grant of 297 acres.

The problem? Unfortunately I was mixed up on different Bacon family homes for over 35 years. Thanks to a welcome communication from John Bacon – an 8th cousin/2x removed – I am finally set straight. My apologies to any readers led astray in the spring 2012 issue of *The Middler*.

Once I had the correct information, I knew what led to my misinterpretation.

First, on a research visit to Godfrey Library in the 1970s, a helpful staff member pointed out some early Bacon family homes. Second, when I met Charles Bacon (1906-1985) in the 1970s, he described the location of his house, and referred to a distinctive barn as a landmark. Third, the 1935 survey of historic houses in Middletown was confirmation. But I know *now* that I was misled because of *two* barns and *two* Bacon family homes on either side! ■

At right, the former Charles Bacon family home at 401 Newfield Street. The home of *Middler* subject Grace Bacon was to the north at 491 Newfield Street.



Above – to the south – is 353 Newfield Street, built as early as 1699 by Nathaniel Bacon II, showing the red barn in the background.

BOOKS OF INTEREST***Francois Weil's history of American genealogy explores its motives & practice through the years***

By R.W. Bacon
Editor, *The Middler*

As a family historian or genealogist, have you ever stopped dead in your tracks, in a moment of clarity while looking away from the microfilm reader, and asked yourself, "Exactly why do I do this, anyway?"

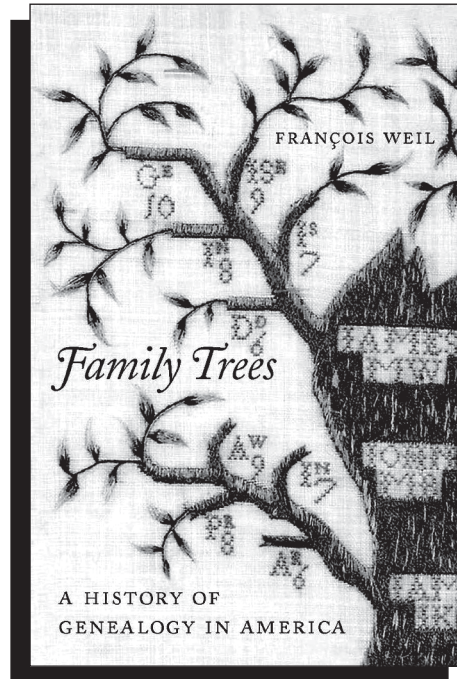
If you have, you will find *Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America*, by Francois Weil (Harvard University Press, 2013), to be a riveting book, as it explores the varied motivations of American genealogists through the centuries.

If you are still going full-throttle on research and have never stopped to think about such motivations, you'll still find the book informative: You'll learn why those late 19th-century authors – who got you off the track of real evidence when you were a rookie – were so often puffed up, deluded, or just plain wrong.

The author, Francois Weil, is a French historian, scholar, and professor who has devoted his career to the study of North American migration, industrialization, urban history, and historiography. The book is the product of 10 years of research in the U.S.

The 304-page book is divided into six chapters. After a brief look at the place of genealogy in early European history, the book treats its subject chronologically, and proceeds from the Colonial era, through the early 19th-century North-South culture clash, to the later 19th-century pride in heredity and "race," to the beginnings of scientific genealogy, to the later 20th-century of Alex Haley's *Roots*, the Internet, and DNA. Throughout, the author clarifies the motivations for genealogical interest.

In the first chapter, "Lineage and Family in Colonial America," the author notes that going back to the sixth century, genealogy was the



prerogative of princes and kings, and not until the 12th century did lesser nobles record pedigrees in order to retain claim to land or authority. In the early 17th century, in centralized monarchies, pedigrees of the wider population become matters of state.

In the earliest American Colonial period, preoccupied settlers had no access to genealogical expertise in London. It was not until the early 18th century that concerns of status-related genealogy emerged, first among Virginia planters, then among Boston merchants. Aside from status genealogy, the earliest settlers, including slaves from Africa, preserved kinship

In this book, you'll learn why those late 19th-century authors – who got you off the track of real evidence when you were a rookie – were so often puffed up, deluded, or just plain wrong.

records through naming practices, or by inscriptions in family Bibles. The author notes that by the early 18th century, some people were asking their oldest kin to record for posterity stories about the family's earliest years in America. Objects played a role, such as coats of arms, engraved silver, and embroidered samplers.

In 1771, the first American genealogy was published, *The Genealogy of the Family of Samuel Stebbins*. It is notable because it was not by a wealthy aristocrat, but rather the work of Luke Stebbins (1722-1775), an innkeeper and schoolmaster from Kensington, Conn. Stebbins wrote that the book about the family might "excite in their descendants a laudable ambition to imitate those things that were excellent, praiseworthy, and amiable in them." (Stebbins once ran a tavern in Middletown.)

In chapter two, about "The Rise of American Genealogy" after the Revolutionary War and through the first half of the 19th century, the author brings to light another motivation: Pensions and land bonuses for war veterans and their families required proof of lineage. This period saw a growing appreciation for the independence movement, and saw the formation of historical societies in Massachusetts (1791) and New York (1804). In New England, interest in local history and antiquarianism grew. In 1829, John Farmer (1789-1838) of New Hampshire published his *Genealogical Register of the First Settlers of New England*, a landmark effort in codifying genealogy. Farmer was unwilling to accept "tradition," and demanded evidence from primary sources. His collaboration with other antiquarians fomented the idea of the New England Historic Genealogical Society in 1845, and its publication *The Register*, which began in 1847.

continued on page 8

'Stuff' & family history ... *continued from page 1*

Heritage of an Albany County, N.Y. Family." The author, a longtime curator, and now historian emeritus, at the New York State Museum in Albany, presented a case study of how material objects were assembled to tell the story of eight generations of one family in a museum exhibition.

The exhibition, on display for 10 months in 2006, was made possible by the generations of the Tompkins family of Coeymans Hollow, N.Y., that lived in the same community for 250 years. The two brothers who inherited the 1837 family farmhouse full of possessions knew they had something special, and when the property was sold in 1977, the collection was saved and moved, first to Michigan, then to Arizona. When the last brother died in 1998, the collection was donated to the New York State Museum.

The Tompkins line of the family moved from Concord, Mass. to Dutchess County, N.Y., and was in Coeymans Hollow by the early 19th century. Marriages to descendants of early Dutch settlers, however, connected the Tompkins family to the families – and furnishings – of an earlier time, back to the stone houses of the 1740s. Central to the family collection is the mid-18th-century Dutch furniture that traces back to Andries Ten Eyck (1718-1802), or possibly to his father, Coenradt Ten Eyck (1678-1753). Besides furniture, the family heirlooms in the exhibition

included silver, jewelry, quilts, coverlets, Bibles, framed marriage certificates, account books, ledgers, photographs, diaries, and monogrammed needlework.

The collection and museum exhibition illustrated how marriages bring material objects into a household, as it was generally the new bride that inherited moveable goods. Because the collection spanned 250 years, the exhibition provided insight on what kinds of objects people deemed to be worth saving. Was utility the most important consideration? Personal association? Value? Aesthetics? It was apparent that in this family there was at least one individual, at least in every other generation, that was proactive about saving for posterity. The exhibition told the story of the family, but it also aimed to provoke thought among 21st-century visitors.

Curator/author John Scherer observed that preservation of family possessions is a responsibility that some assume as a privilege, but others regard as a burden. When those who are burdened sell off family heirlooms, the history and provenance are lost.

"Often museums come to the rescue and preserve history along with artifacts," wrote Scherer. He noted that family collections often come to museums because there are no heirs, or because more recent generations did not have the interest, space, or resources to care for them. "When families preserve their past and traditions along with their treasured possessions, it allows earlier generations to speak to the present," he wrote. "This intimacy with the past provides a personal insight into the lives of our ancestors, enabling us to examine more deeply the families whose lives define our history."

Within These Walls. Visitors to Washington, D.C. who are interested in family history through material objects will be fully engaged by "Within These Walls," an exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. In the center of the gallery stands a 1760 post-and-beam house from Ipswich,

At right is a 1963 view of the house in Ipswich, Mass. that was reassembled for the *Within These Walls* exhibition.

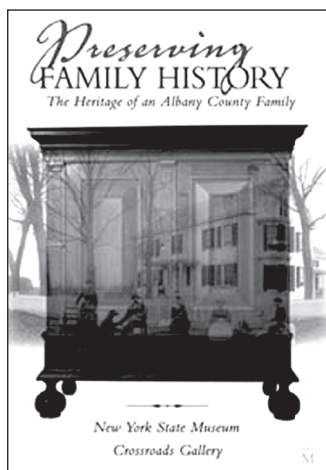


Mass., that was reassembled in the gallery in 1966. Around the perimeter of the gallery, facing away from the house, are vignettes of living spaces and work spaces. The vignettes, along with interpretive text, trace the history of the house and its occupants, over the span of 200 years.

Conventional historical and genealogical sleuthing uncovered details about the lives and occupations of those who lived in the house. From this information, artifacts from the Smithsonian's vast collection were selected to interpret those lives in the context of the period. The last family to live in the home, from the 1920s to 1961, donated photographs and military records for the exhibition. For the earlier families, the furnishings, tools, and other household items in the exhibition have no direct connection to the house, and some objects may be recently-fashioned props. But in much the same way as the Tompkins exhibition, the objects tell the story of the five families that lived in the house, and illuminate the social, cultural, and economic history across the span of time.

Borrow an idea from the Smithsonian. So, there's an idea family historians can borrow from the Smithsonian: Where the original objects, tools, or utensils are not to be had, even museum professionals find it acceptable at times to find an equivalent, as long as it is clearly identified as such. For example, if your great-great-grandfather was a lumberjack, and both he and his ax are long-

continued on page 5



Preserving Family History: The Heritage of an Albany County Family, was an exhibition presented at the New York State Museum in 2006.

'Stuff' & family history ... continued from page 4

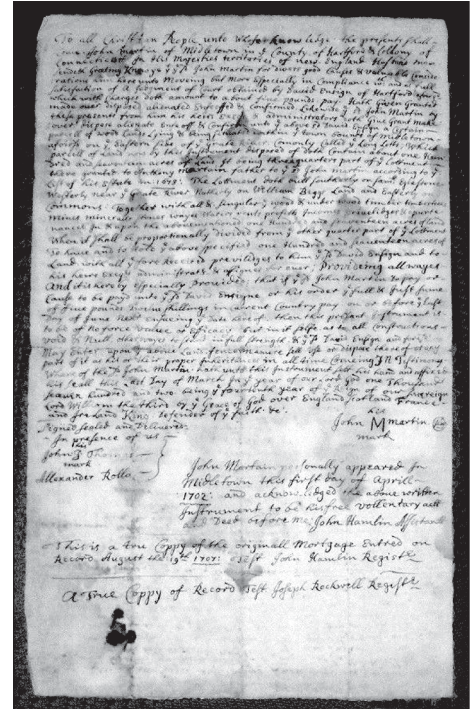
gone, and you are curious about what his 1850 ax was like, you could do some research and attempt to track down one made by the same manufacturer. If an equivalent cannot be found – the organic ax handles of that age are probably already dust – perhaps a reproduction can fill the bill if you need to feel that ax in your hands.

Speaking of reproductions. Most of us do not have collections like the Smithsonian to call upon to illustrate family history. For those so inclined, learning a craft and building your own reproduction can be not only a brain-stretching exercise, but also a way to gain understanding of the real-time manual challenges faced by earlier generations. Furniture-making with 19th-century tools, embroidering, weaving, and carving are only a few examples of crafts that can broaden your understanding of your family history. Courses in such crafts are common offerings by museum education departments.

Middletown context ... in analog and digital form. Upon assuming editorship of *The Middler* in 2005, your editor set about to collect "stuff" related to early Middletown. But rather than collect material



Middletown-related items recently seen on eBay: A 1702 deed, a silver spoon, a goblet, and an unknown "Mr. & Mrs. White."



objects, this collecting was confined to images of "stuff" that could be used to illustrate articles in print. This collecting of images accelerated in 2007 during the wholesale rebuilding of the SMFSD website, and included both digital images and hard-copies of books and magazine articles.

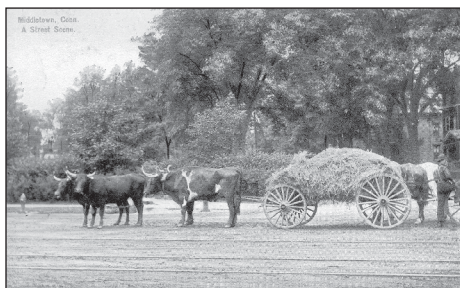
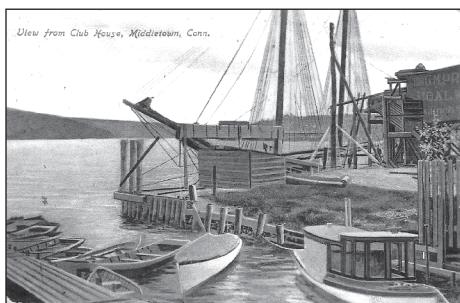
Thanks to the always-growing Internet, the bulk of this image collection is comprised of material published before 1923 that is safely in the public domain. Early on, eBay (www.ebay.com) was a rich source for Middletown-related postcards. The earliest are in the public domain, and can be acquired without spending a fortune. The American Booksellers Exchange (www.abebooks.com) has been a source for affordable hard-copy books and pamphlets. The Internet Archive (www.archive.org) has been indispensable as a source for complete digital PDF files of public domain books – with photos.

Since your editor does not live surrounded by barrels of cash, or pallets of gold bars, purchasing was, and is, limited. But for personal use only, digital images from eBay, and other nooks and crannies of the Internet, have served to expand interpretation of family history. For

example, in 2007 a multi-page deed came up for auction on eBay. It documented the donation of a long strip of land, one rod wide (16.5 feet) to the town by my 6th-great-grandfather, Joseph Bacon (1728-1785) in 1784. Philip Mortimer, proprietor of the neighboring rope manufacturing business, donated an equal strip of land. Together, their donations formed what is now known as Liberty Street in Middletown. (Mortimer donated the land which is now Mortimer Cemetery in 1778, 1781, and 1794.) The reserve price for this deed is long forgotten, but it was more than your editor wanted to afford. The whereabouts of the hard-copy deed are unknown today, but thanks to a few mouse-clicks, the image was saved for my own digital collection, and is tucked away on several hard drives.

A recent search of Middletown-related "stuff" on eBay brings up photos, publications, tools, silver, postcards, deeds, milk-bottle tops, advertisements, billheads, and more. If your connection to Middletown is in the distant past, eBay is a good place to check out in your search for family history and geographical context. For

continued on page 6



Above are examples of Middletown postcard views that are relevant to early settlers, even though they date from 1907.

'Stuff' & family history ... *continued from page 5*

other Middletown-relevant discoveries, search the high-roller auction sites for antique furniture, as pieces of Middletown origin are often attributed to a particular owner or craftsman.

Books. Instead of barrels of cash, your editor is surrounded by books. Four special books are highlighted here that are especially relevant to interpreting family history through material objects.

The Age of Homespun. Finding historical context in material objects is the subject of *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of An American Myth* (2001) by scholar and historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. The premise of the book is that objects are documents that speak about the past, and have meaning when joined to the experiences of those who made them, used them, and preserved them. The author studies 14 objects, including a cupboard, two baskets, a rug, a Native American pocketbook, a yarn winder, two spinning wheels, a tablecloth, and an unfinished sock.

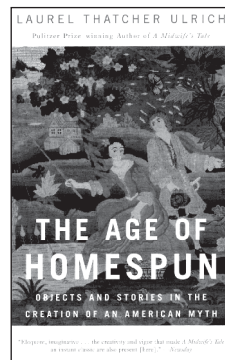
The notions of "homespun" and homemade are weighty in this book, in our age of manufactured gadgets, cheap imported housewares, and frozen dinners. The "homespun" objects carry forward the close relationship with their maker. The objects, their interpretation, and their stories, are presented in chronological order, from 1676 to 1837.

One example in the book is a boldly decorated cupboard made in Hadley, Mass. in 1715, that has the name of its first owner, Hannah Barnard, painted on the front. The author mines the cultural history of the cupboard, which in its physical presence makes statements about ownership, literacy, pride, and permanence. The cupboard was utilitarian, but it was also a way to display belongings (i.e. relative "wealth") and demonstrate talent in showing a vocabulary of decorative motifs. The cupboard is also a good example of "moveable property" that

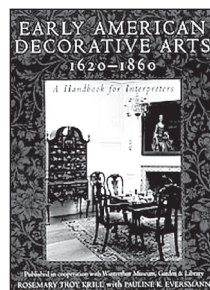
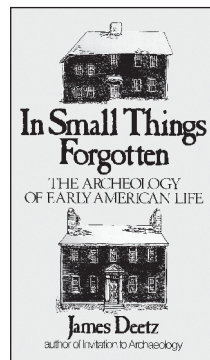
was inherited by the female line, in contrast to the house and land that passed down to sons.

Textiles are truly "homespun," and they receive worthy attention in this book. Lost on us today is an understanding of how labor intensive the production of textiles was in earlier times. The author obviously invested much time and effort learning the handwork of numerous crafts, and the book includes much detail on spinning, weaving, and basket-making that will add to reader understanding.

Any self-respecting scholar studies every aspect of their subject, and true to her reputation, Ulrich uncovers meaning beyond the warmth, prettiness, and preciousness that contribute to the early-American "homespun" myth that is still held by many people. The author contends that pastoral imagery concealed both urban poverty and the relentless struggles of rural life, and that the themes of harmony and simplicity concealed the violence and conflict in early America. Ulrich leads readers to face the fact that cloth-making for "homespun" helped drive the seizure of Native American lands for growing flax and raising sheep, and helped drive the expansion of slavery, by its demand for plantation-grown cotton.



The Age of Homespun by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich teaches object interpretation by example. *In Small Things Forgotten* by James Deetz is the classic of historical archaeology. *Early American Decorative Arts* is for museum pros and enthusiasts.



In Small Things Forgotten.

Anyone interested in "digging" into America's past is advised to read the compact classic, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (1977, expanded & revised 1996) by James Deetz (1930-1970). The author, a Harvard-educated anthropologist, archaeologist, and professor, whose area of interest was primarily the social and cultural change in the New England and Virginia colonies, is regarded as "the father of historical archaeology."

The author's main point is that the focus of traditional historians only on written documentation limits discovery, and that the study of material culture can fill our gaps in understanding. Gravestones, doorways, musical instruments, and pottery reveal details that may not be in the written record of history, yet fill out the story of life as it was lived.

In Small Things Forgotten is a short and cogent book that once read, will be cherished for its insights. And if you cannot get enough of James Deetz, look for *The Times of Their Lives: Life, Love, and Death in Plymouth Colony* (with Patricia Scott Deetz; 2000).

Early American Decorative Arts.

If you are among those with furniture and household objects handed down through your family, or simply have an interest in early decorative arts, you can go straight to the head of the class with *Early American Decorative Arts 1620-1860: A Handbook for Interpreters* (2001, revised 2010), by Rosemary Troy Krill, lecturer at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware. The large-format, 278-page book, illustrated with 180 photos, was adapted from training materials developed for interpreters at the Winterthur Museum.

The book covers the major furniture styles in the 1620-1860 period, as well as other decorative objects found in the home: ceramics, textiles, paintings, prints, metalwork, glass, clocks, and more. Because the book is aimed at museum interpretation professionals, readers will learn how to look at and analyze objects in the social, economic,

continued on page 7

'Stuff' & family history ... continued from page 6

and cultural context of their time, and learn the principles, goals, and means of object interpretation for the public.

Furniture Treasury. Those particularly interested in the earliest American furniture and hardware can turn to the comprehensive two-volume *Furniture Treasury* (1928) by the one-and-only Wallace Nutting (1861-1941).

Wallace Nutting is best known for his photographs – hand-tinted by his staff of 200 colorists – which he turned into a hugely profitable business in the early 20th-century. He started the business after retiring from the stress of the ministry at age 43, and devoted the rest of his life to his various enterprises, which were all based on the marketing of a romanticized, idealized American past. Besides the hand-tinted photographs, Nutting's businesses included the operation of staged museum houses, the "New

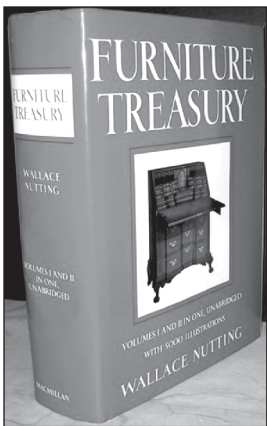
England Beautiful" series of books, illustrated lecture presentations, and the manufacture and sale of early-American furniture reproductions.

Even though Nutting made a living as a huckster of an invented past, he was also an obsessive collector. His *Furniture Treasury* (and *Furniture of the Pilgrim Century: 1620-1720*, published in 1921) showcase his collection of early American furniture, which he used to make measured drawings for the furniture factory he opened in Saugus, Mass. in 1917. Manufacturing facilities were later moved to Ashland, then Framingham, Mass. The most popular – and affordable – Nutting reproduction was his Windsor chair. Thomas Denenberg, author of *Wallace Nutting and the Invention of Old America*, wrote that Nutting's collection of 1620-1720 furniture included 40 chests, 30 tables, 60 chairs, plus cupboards, boxes, cabinets, and desks – in all, over 300 pieces of furniture and 600 utensils and fixtures. In 1925 Nutting sold his collection to banker J.P. Morgan, who then donated it to the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Conn., where it remains on permanent exhibition. A visit to the Wadsworth Atheneum to view the Wallace Nutting collection is an essential pilgrimage for the early-American furniture enthusiast, and the *Furniture Treasury* is recommended for those who cannot visit in person.

A closing observation: As you reach the end of this article, you may



realize that you will never look at your disciplinarian Grandma's multi-use flat wooden spatula the same way again. At the same time, future observers will probably have a grand time analyzing our present era from the remains of our material culture. Gas-powered brooms? Triple-wide baby strollers? Gangly, 15-foot high inflatable Uncle Sams? Sweaters for rat-sized dogs? If you plan to be around to participate in those future studies, get grounded in the subject with *Stuff*, by Daniel Miller (2009), a scholar of our 21st-century fads and follies. In the meantime, may you enjoy the rewards of expanding your understanding of earlier generations through the study of their "stuff." ■



Wallace Nutting (1861-1941), the self-appointed spokesman of the Colonial Revival.

From the President ... continued from page 1

him better judge the project's potential. Visit www.familytreedna.com/public/MiddletownSettlers for details. This project departs from the usual surname DNA study, as it explores connections between those living in a specific community at a given historical period. If you would like to assist, or if you have questions, contact Peter directly at pbirvine@yahoo.com. We will keep you informed as goals of the project are defined and possible benefits are explored.

Are you thinking of traveling to New England either to see the spectacular fall color or to do some on-site genealogical research? If so, next year – 2015 – would be the year to do so. The SMFSD triennial meeting will be held in the Middletown, Conn. area in early October, 2015. The exact dates have not yet been determined. If you would like to help plan the gathering, have an activity to suggest, or if you have a request to make, please feel free to share your thoughts with planning committee chair Barb Stenberg at bstenberg@cox.net.

On April 15-19, 2015 some of us will attend the biennial New England Regional Genealogical Conference in Providence, Rhode Island. Next year the theme will be "Navigating the Past: Sailing into the Future." SMFSD will once again have a display aimed to recruit members during the two-hour Society Fair on Thursday evening. It is always fun to hang-out with other SMFSD members at this event, and we can use your enthusiasm to help sell our organization. ■

**Marge Piersen
President, SMFSD**

Weil's history of genealogy

continued from page 3

Other publications revealed a wave of increased interest in the genealogy of the common person. One of the NEHGS founders, Lemuel Shattuck (1793-1859), a Boston bookseller and politician, published his how-to book on genealogy in 1841, *A Complete System of Family Registration*. Between 1860 and 1862, Boston banker James Savage (1784-1873), published the four-volume, 2500-page *Genealogical Dictionary of the First Settlers of New England*, an expansion of his friend John Farmer's work, which embodied his principles of "democratic genealogy." Savage maintained that the humble laborer "who partook in the glorious work of peopling our New England world" should get equal commemoration as the wealthy or powerful. In 1862, William H. Whitmore (1836-1900), a Boston businessman, antiquarian, and proponent of scholarly genealogy, published the first edition of his *Handbook of American Genealogy*. (Incidentally, neither Savage nor Whitmore were descendants of early Middletown settlers John Savage or Francis Whitmore.)

The mid-19th century also saw the beginnings of family associations and family reunions. Following closely were those who were looking to profit. Publishers and printers investigated the genealogy market. Joel Munsell (1808-1880) of Albany, N.Y. became the preeminent genealogy publisher of the time, and other entrepreneurs printed and sold fill-in-the-blank family registers. Genealogists-for-hire first found opportunity in this era. Most notable, or infamous, was Horatio Gates Somerby (1805-1872), possibly the first "professional" genealogist in the 1840s, who did research in England for well-heeled clients. After his death, however, much of his compiled "research" was found to be the fraudulent product of a profitable imagination. The egalitarian or moral purposes of a few were undermined by commercialism.

In the latter half of the 19th century and into the 20th, the democratic and scholarly genealogy of Farmer, Savage, and Whitmore was subsumed by race and eugenics.

Chapter Three, "Antebellum Blood and Vanity," returns to the discussion of the North-South cultural clash, and the resentment in the South that New England history was presented as America's history. In New England, the phrase "Puritan stock" was used among the patrician class to signify collective identity, moral values, and virtue. In the South, the parallel was the myth of the aristocratic Virginia Cavalier, a symbol of liberty exactly opposite of Colonial-era New England Puritans. (Some scholars contend this myth contributed to the growth of sectionalism, and led to the desire to preserve the status quo.)

The aristocratic-minded in both the North and South were easy marks for fraudulent pedigrees and for services of "claims agents." In the early and mid-19th century, these "agents" would go to England for a handsome fee to investigate genealogy-based claims to estates. The only ones to hit the jackpot were the claims agents.

In Chapter Four, "Upon the Love of Country and Pride of Race," the author explains how, in the latter half of the 19th century and into the 20th, the idealized scholarly genealogy of Farmer, Savage, and Whitmore was subsumed by race and eugenics.

The period from about 1870 to 1920 brought unprecedented social, cultural, and technological change. Immigration, population growth, population shift, and industrialization changed the playing field for descendants of the earliest families. In this period genealogy confirmed for these families a sense of individual and collective superiority, and placed Anglo-Saxons at the top of the heap.

Between 1876 and 1889, a time of centennials celebrating U.S. independence, numerous hereditary societies

were formed – as Weil writes, "an institutional conflation of race, nationalism, and genealogy." The practice of genealogy was not central for these groups, but establishment of a bloodline was. Members routinely paid others to conduct research. This period saw the formation of hundreds of local historical societies which also supported genealogical research. (In Middletown, the Middlesex County Historical Society was founded in 1901.)

Weil writes that in the early 20th century, the DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) transformed the culture of genealogy: "Because of their role in developing the cult of the revolutionary past in a context of racial exclusiveness, the DAR helped reconfigure the genealogical paradigm that had dominated the United States during the antebellum period." Weil includes direct quotations of early 20th-century DAR officers.

The influence of the new hereditary and patriotic societies was such that other groups – the Huguenots, Swedes, Germans, Jews, Scotch, and Irish – practiced genealogy to "counterbalance the weight of Anglo-Saxonism."

Chapter Five, "Pedigrees and the Market," discusses how genealogy became a big business to keep up with the growing number of hereditary societies in the late 19th and early 20th century. Middletown's own Frank Farnsworth Starr was a beneficiary of this growing market, not only as a highly-principled and thorough researcher, but as a seller of blank genealogy charts.

Genealogical fraud proliferated in this period, however, as Americans accepted falsified pedigrees both out of ignorance, or to aggrandize themselves or their ancestors. Weil mentions the usual low-lives of genealogy: the aforementioned Horatio Gates Somerby, and Gustave Anjou (1863-1942). Anjou was born in Sweden as Gustaf Jungberg, but adopted his fiancé's name for his genealogy work. (He never studied at Uppsala. But he did serve a term there for forgery.) In 1890 he came to

continued on page 9



Weil's history of genealogy

continued from page 3

the U.S. and made his home in Staten Island, N.Y., his base of operations from which he marketed his services as a genealogist, and prepared hundreds of fraudulent pedigrees.

The early 20th century saw the first wave of professional academic historians, and they took great pains to distinguish themselves from genealogists. At the time, the new "scientific genealogists," who championed "realism over romanticism" and "accuracy over narration" were in the minority. The American Historical Association, formed in 1884, validated professional historians by academic degrees. There was no such validation for genealogists. Scientific genealogists did not roll over, however, and took up the fight for respect. Leaders included Donald Lines Jacobus, George Andrews Moriarty, Arthur Adams, John Insley Coddington, Milton Rubincam, and Meredith S. Colket. Adams, Coddington, and Colket founded the American Society of Genealogists in 1940.

The late 19th and early 20th century saw the growth of family associations and family reunions. These were for social rather than scientific genealogical purposes, and also served to encourage "family traditions" and "generational continuity" – thinly-veiled euphemisms.

In 1894, another development that continues to influence genealogy was the pronouncement by William Woodruff, president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, that directed Mormons to "trace their genealogies as far as they can, and to be sealed to their fathers and mothers."

In the aftermath of *Roots*, commentators noted that a motive of self-understanding appeared to be replacing the elitist quest for ancient lineage or social superiority.

This focus on genealogy went back to the 1836 doctrinal core of Mormonism.

The author summarizes the genealogy scene from the Civil War to World War II as a period in which Americans who were interested in genealogy used it to define identity in racial and nationalist terms, to reinforce widely-presumed Anglo-Saxon superiority. In looking at the big picture, the author posits that it took Nazism, a world war, and the civil rights movement to discredit this approach to genealogy, and redefine the discipline in democratic and multicultural terms.

Chapter Six, "Everybody's Search for Roots," begins with *Roots*, the 1976 book by Alex Haley (and the subsequent 12-hour television series), and proceeds to the present with discussion of two major developments that have impacted genealogy, the Internet and DNA genetics.

By July 1977, genealogy was in the news after Haley's "factually based" book about generations of his family extending forward from his African slave ancestor. In the aftermath, commentators noted that a motive of self-understanding appeared to be replacing the elitist quest for ancient lineage or social superiority.

Ready to step in and assist were relatively new genealogical societies. (For instance, the Connecticut Society of Genealogists was formed in 1968.) Operating in a new cultural context, these regional societies offered library resources, publications, and education.

Also ready for the *Roots* boom was the American Society of Genealogists, which had in place a program for certification of qualified practitioners, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which opened branch libraries, expanded its micro-film program, and presented seminars and conferences for those outside the church. Also ready for the boom were the usual parasites ready to take advantage of people's credulity.

Toward the close of the 20th century, personal computers, genealogy software, and the Internet boosted interest in genealogy and transformed

its practice. Today genealogy is cited by many as a "favorite hobby," so it follows that commercial enterprises would spring up to meet demand. The author devotes several pages to the rise of *Ancestry.com* and other genealogical conglomerates. The mass of genealogical information accessible via the Internet grows ever more mind-boggling by the day.

In the last two decades, the use of DNA in genealogy has brought about a shift from cultural genealogy back to a genetic genealogy, in which the "authority of the book" has given way to the "authority of the lab." The most notable example was the 1998 publication of the DNA studies that identified children of Thomas Jefferson and African-American slave Sally Hemings. Weil views the genetic complexity revealed by DNA as a positive development, a constant reminder that we are all multi-racial, and "related to each other only to a lesser or greater extent."

Weil's study of American genealogy – and its democratization, commercialization, and geneticization – led him to this conclusion: "Over the past four centuries, family trees have always said more about the genealogists than about their ancestors. For Americans, genealogy has been a quest for discovery of (1) who they were, (2) who they thought they were, or (3) who they wanted to be." The author observes that at different periods in time, genealogy filled different social, economic, moral, political, racial, religious, and familial needs, and he believes that the study of the practice of genealogy will continue to offer insight into American culture. ■

"For Americans, genealogy has been a quest for discovery of (1) who they were, (2) who they thought they were, or (3) who they wanted to be."

– Francois Weil

Wilcox Island: Is there history somewhere in the river's mist?

By R.W. Bacon
Editor, *The Middler*

To those immersed in the local and family history of early Middletown, maps are always a delight when seeking further context. In studying maps of Middletown, the Connecticut River is always a geographical and historical point of reference.

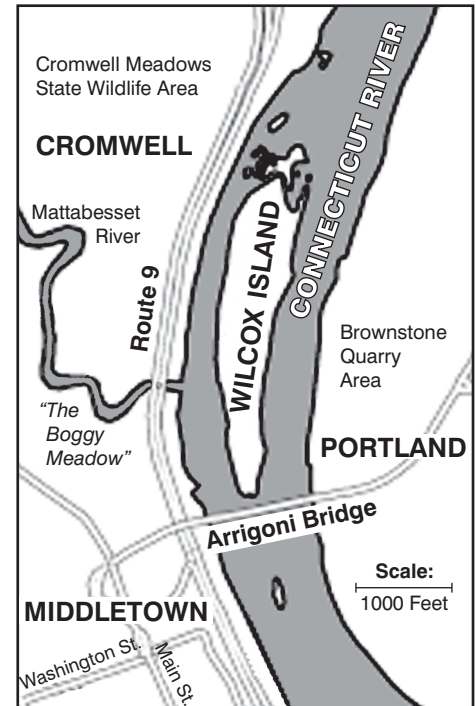
Whether looking at a map of the river, or crossing it on the bridge between Middletown and Portland (known as “East Middletown” in the 17th century), one’s curiosity is aroused by a large undeveloped island in the middle of the river, just north of the bridge. On maps the island is identified as Wilcox Island or Willow Island. The island is about a half-mile long, and from 500 to 700 feet wide.

Then the imagination starts to run. Did anyone ever live on the island? Was the island once connected to “East Middletown”? Did members of the early-settler Wilcox family live there, or use the island for some purpose? In service to you, dear readers, your editor seized onto this subject like a pit bull on a porkchop. What follows is extracted from *A Statistical Account of Middlesex County* by David Dudley Field (1818), and from newspaper articles in the *Hartford Courant* and *Middletown Press*.

Details of the earliest use of the 32-acre island are sketchy – even Dr. Field, usually a comprehensive compiler, refers to numerous other lower river islands by name, but “the small island above Middletown” apparently was not yet formally named in 1818. In his *Statistical Account*, Field noted that in 1817 there were 16 locations along the river in Middletown where fishermen caught and salted shad between April and June, including some “fish places” on what became known as Willow Island. Newspaper articles mention earlier Colonial-era fisheries located on the island, as well as on Dart Island and Haddam Island to the south, that caught 10-foot sturgeons for export to England.

A 2012 *Hartford Courant* article about the nearby Portland brownstone quarries mentioned that in the time before English settlement, Native Americans crossing the river used the island as a half-way point.

A 1900 *Hartford Courant* article indicates that at one time the island was used to graze cattle – in an editorial, the newspaper accused the cattle owners of animal cruelty after men fishing on the island shores reported observing malnourished and untended cows.

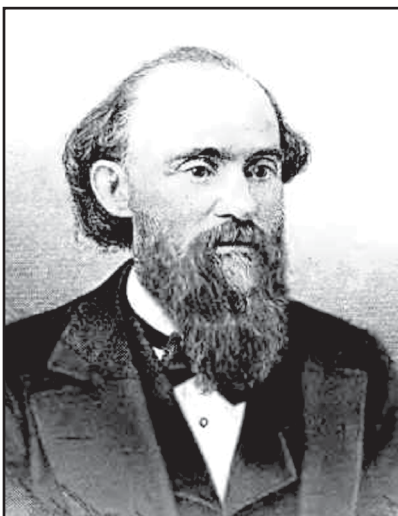


Above is a map of Wilcox Island, which today is a destination for kayakers and canoeists paddling the Mattabeset River.

Apparently the island was used for different forms of recreation in the 19th century. In 1880, a *Middletown Press* advertisement promoted a Sunday afternoon boxing match – and suggested that the more genteel women and children enjoy a picnic and the musical entertainment of a “wheezy accordion” at the opposite end of the island.

A brief tug-of-war over the island occurred in 1908, when investors from

continued on page 11



At left is William Walter Wilcox (1825-1903), founder of the Middletown-based marine hardware manufacturer, Wilcox, Crittenden & Co. His heirs purchased Willow Island in 1920 and presented it as a gift to the city. At right is an early 20th-century postcard view of Willow Island, showing people enjoying a picnic under the trees.





SMFSD Membership Information

If you descend from a pre-1700 settler, we welcome you to join us

The following are individuals (and presumably spouses & families) said to have settled in Middletown, Conn. before 1700. The list is from *The History of Middlesex County* (Henry Whittemore, Beers Co., 1884), derived in part from the *List of Householders & Proprietors*, Middletown, March 22, 1670. **Names in boldface** are the original 1650-54 settlers. **N.B.!** *This list is known to be incomplete!* If you descend from a pre-1700 settler *not* on this list, including a Native American or African-American ancestor, please contact our Registrar about submitting lineage and references. **Not a descendant? Join us in the Friends category!**

Josiah Adkins 1673	Samuel Cotton 1697	Edward Higby 1667	Daniel Pryor 1696	Samuel Stow 1651
Obadiah Allyn 1670	Samuel Doolittle . . . 1693	Thomas Hill 1678	Thomas Ranney . . . 1660	Thomas Stow 1669
Thomas Allen 1650	George Durant 1663	Thomas Hopewell . . 1662	William Roberts . . . 1680	William Sumner . . . 1687
Nathaniel Bacon . 1650	Samuel Eggleston . . 1663	George Hubbard . 1650	Joseph Rockwell . . 1693	James Tappin 1662
William Briggs 1677	John Elton 1677	John Hulbert 1669	Alexander Rollo . . . 1697	Matthias Treat . . 1659
John Blake 1677	Thomas Ferman . . . 1679	Isaac Johnson 1670	Noadiah Russell . . . 1696	Edward Turner . . . 1665
William Blumfield 1650	Edward Foster 1670	Francis Jones 1672	David Sage 1662	John Ward 1664
John Boarn 1677	Jonathan Gilbert . . 1672	John Jordan 1678	John Savage 1650	William Ward 1659
Alexander Bow 1660	John Gill 1676	John Kirby 1653	Arthur Scovill 1671	Andrew Warner . . . 1667
Nathaniel Brown . . . 1655	Richard Goodale . . . 1671	Isaac Lane 1664	Edward Shepard . . . 1687	Robert Warner 1655
Thomas Burk 1670	George Graves 1650?	Thomas Lewis 1687	Joseph Smith 1675	Robert Webster . . 1650
William Cheney 1655	John Hall 1650	William Lucas 1667	William Smith . . . 1650	Benjamin West 1698
Samuel Clark 1676	Richard Hall 1650	Daniel Markham . . . 1677	William Southmayd . 1674	Thomas Wetmore 1650
Jasper Clements . . . 1670	Samuel Hall 1650	Anthony Martin . . . 1661	Comfort Starr 1673	Nathaniel White . 1650
Henry Cole 1650?	Giles Hamlin 1650	John Martin 1650	James Stancliff . . . 1686	Francis Whitmore . . 1674
Nathaniel Collins . . 1664	Benjamin Hands . . . 1678	Thomas Miller . . . 1650	Samuel Stocking . 1650	John Wilcox 1654
Samuel Collins 1665	Daniel Harris 1653	John Payne 1676	John Stow 1667	James Wright 1690
William Cornwell 1650	William Harris . . . 1650	George Phillips . . . 1680	Nathaniel Stow . . . 1676	

Membership benefits . . .

When you join the Society of Middletown First Settlers Descendants, you will receive:

- Two issues per year of *The Middler*, the SMFSD newsletter full of information useful for research about Middletown's first settler families and local history.
- Access to the SMFSD web site which includes first settler profiles, genealogy resources, local history articles, a custom-prepared annotated bibliography for Middletown research, and an archive of past *Middler* issues.
- The annual membership roster enabling you to network with Middletown "cousins" and researchers across the country.
- The opportunity to attend SMFSD meetings (every three years) in Middletown that include genealogy research, cemetery tours, library/museum visits, networking, and social events.
- The opportunity to participate in the organization, suggest/plan meeting activities, and vote on SMFSD business.

Membership is a simple 1-2-3 procedure . . .

If you are a descendant of *any* pre-1700 Middletown settler, and would like to join SMFSD, here is the easy procedure:

- (1) Send an outline/worksheet of your lineage to the Registrar. The applicant shall do their own genealogical research, and the resulting lineage should be accompanied by copies of reference material by generation. The Registrar seeks to verify submitted information, but does not research family lines.
- (2) Send a check payable to the Society of Middletown First Settlers Descendants (1650-1700) for the non-refundable \$10.00 application handling fee.
- (3) The Registrar will review the application for approval. Documentation is required only through the line of descent from the 1650-1700 settler. If needed, guidelines will be sent that help document descent by generation. (The Society will return an application if more documentation is needed. It is the applicant's responsibility to complete any gaps in the records.) When approved, the new member can choose to pay annual or lifetime dues:
 - (A) Annual dues (Nov. 1 to Oct. 31) are \$20.00 (in addition to the initial \$10.00 handling fee).
 - (B) A new member may elect to pay lifetime dues (instead of annual dues) based on age: Age 0-50, \$300; Age 51-70, \$200; Age 70+, \$100. Life Members receive a certificate suitable for framing.

Friends of SMFSD. Are you a history enthusiast? Would you like to receive *The Middler*? Join us at \$20 per year!

Please send membership inquiries & lineage information to: Hal Whitmore, Registrar, Society of Middletown First Settlers Descendants, 1301 N. Harrison St., Apt. 201, Wilmington, DE 19806; or via e-mail to: hbwhitmore@yahoo.com.

Wilcox Island ...

continued from page 10

New York proposed building a summer resort on the island. In response, Middletown residents urged the city to buy the island for public recreational use. The New York investors abandoned their plan, but if took a few years for a public park plan to develop.

In 1920, the heirs of William Walter Wilcox (1825-1903), the founder of the marine hardware firm of Wilcox, Crittenden & Co., purchased the

island, with the express purpose of donating it to the city of Middletown to be "an open air resort." The gift was accepted at a city council meeting on Sept. 18, 1920, and later the island was renamed Wilcox Island. [William Walter Wilcox was a 4th great-grandson of early Middletown settler John Wilcox II (1622-1676).]

A footbridge was built from the river's edge in Middletown to the island, and swings and picnic tables

were installed for family recreation. The park enjoyed years of use, but repeated flooding and ice damage took their toll, washing out the footbridge almost annually. Eventually the city chose not to rebuild it.

By 1960, when then Mayor John Roth considered revitalizing the island park, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers needed to approve any plans. The pragmatist mayor first proposed a bridge to the island

continued on page 12

Wilcox Island ... from page 11

branching off Rte. 9. A few years later he favored leasing the island to outside investors who wanted to build a marina. A 1964 *Hartford Courant* article reported that the mayor had departed from his recreation-oriented plans, and wanted to use the island as a city dump. The Army Corps of Engineers thought that idea stunk. For years nothing was done on the island, although it remained listed as a city park and recreation site.

From 1988 to 1993, Wilcox Island was a visual landmark for drivers on Rte. 9 thanks to a six-ton homemade houseboat moored at an island cove. News accounts say the crude craft was the home of a solitary fellow who spent his days tending to his boat and studying the U.S. Constitution. He rafted to Cromwell to buy groceries and supplies. One day the police

impounded his boat, cut the mooring lines, and towed it to Harbor Park on the Middletown side of the river. Shortly thereafter, "the Commodore" and his boat disappeared under the cover of darkness to parts unknown.

Today the once-open pasture and willow tree island is overgrown with trees and brush, and its most frequent use is by canoeists and kayakers. Wilcox Island is a destination in the *Mattabeset River Canoe/Kayak Trail Guide* and *Middletown Trail Guide*.

Today there are no more 10-foot sturgeon in the Connecticut River, and no more sickly cows or boxing matches on the island. The rickety houseboat floated away into the mist. The island never became a marina or a city dump. It is satisfying to know, however, that the wishes of the Wilcox family are still being honored almost 100 years later, and that the gift to Middletown continues to be a recreational destination for the quiet paddles of kayakers and canoeists. ■



Above is Wilcox Island today, from the west side of the river. Visible at the far right is the Arrigoni Bridge, connecting Middletown and Portland, which was completed in 1938.