

Spring 2015



A Newsletter of the Old Town Hall Museum
624 South Britain Road | Southbury, Connecticut 06488

Old Town Hall Museum

Wednesdays 10—Noon
Other hours by appt:
(203) 405-3124

South Britain Library

Tuesdays 6—8 PM
(203) 232-9874

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2014—2015

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**HISTORY BITES LECTURE TAKES A *CLOSER LOOK* AT
SOUTHBURY'S HERITAGE VILLAGE**

Maybe it was the topic, maybe it was the beautiful spring weather, or maybe it was a combination of both that led to the record turnout on Thursday, May 16, to the Society's lecture on Southbury's Heritage Village. Part of the annual History Bites lunchtime lecture series sponsored by the Connecticut Community Foundation, this year's theme was *A Closer Look*. Mildred Gallik, of the Heritage Village Archive Committee, presented an in-depth and insightful perspective on the construction of, and life in, the Village. Kimberly Neuenschwander, the Historical Society's archivist, spoke briefly on the debate surrounding the zoning laws and their eventual abolishment — a subject so controversial it divided the town of Southbury. The audience was a healthy mix of townspeople, Village residents and employees, and even a family member of the Paparazzos (the builders of Heritage Village). Also in attendance was First Selectman, Ed Edelson. The lecture was so popular a repeat event was held the following Tuesday, May 21.

Thank you to Mildred and Kimberly for their research and presentations on the fascinating history of Heritage Village. The Society would also like to thank Museum Administrator and board member Leigh Graham, board member Don Meyer, and volunteers Betsy Cullen and Shilpa Chandrashekar for their time and hard work organizing the event and assistance in making the events run smoothly.

If you missed the event, transcripts of Mildred and Kimberly's speeches are available in the Heritage Village and Historical Society Archives.



Mildred Gallik
captivates the
audience



A full house



Kimberly & Mildred
before the lecture

PHOTOGRAPHS AT FRIENDLY'S RESTAURANT

The Historical Society was asked to provide photographs of the Southbury community for display in the newly renovated Friendly's restaurant located in Heritage Village. The three chosen were the Soule-Roberts Sales Office for Lakeside Lots, the Southbury Volunteer Firemens Association Ladies Auxiliary, and the Southbury Volunteer Firemens Association Center Firehouse. Stop by the restaurant and see if you can spot all three — you might just recognize yourself or someone you know.

SOUTHBURY PLAYHOUSE EXHIBIT AT THE SOUTHBURY PUBLIC LIBRARY

In the Brinker Fireplace room (main level of the Southbury Public Library) the Society has a small exhibit on the Southbury Playhouse. Opened in the early 1950's, the Playhouse was a cultural boon to Southbury through the mid-1980's and brought many artists, actors, and actresses to the area. Local high school students were hired as ushers and celebrities would often stay with local townspeople during a show's run. The Southbury Playhouse was closed in 1985. Declared condemned by the city in 1986, it was demolished in 1989. The Historical Society will honor the Southbury Playhouse this year on its 2015 Christmas Ornament.



THE SOUTH BRITAIN LIBRARY

About: A small lending library located in South Britain, the South Britain Library (SBL) is open most Tuesday evenings throughout the year from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 PM (weather permitting). Volunteer staff is available during this time for questions, book assistance, or research. Once only available to Library Association members, now the holdings are available to all Southbury residents to enjoy. Books on loan from the SBL may be returned on Tuesday evenings to the SBL or to the main Southbury Public Library. SBL reserves the right to not loan some of the more precious, rare, and antique books. The genealogy and Connecticut History section is popular with patrons researching their towns, properties, and families. We would love to have you visit on a Tuesday evening. Please come join us!

The South Britain Library Book Club: The SBL Book Club meets at 7 PM on the third Tuesday during most fall, winter, and spring months (weather permitting). Books for reading and discussion are chosen from best seller lists during the library's initial opening (1904 – 1969). A small group of faithful monthly readers, the Book Club would love to increase membership and encourages people to join us. The last meeting of the spring season is May 19. We will be reading and discussing Louis Bromfield's, *The Strange Case of Miss Annie Spragg*, and will choose our fall reading selections. If you would like to join but have not read the May selection, you are still welcome to attend, listen, and help choose our fall readings. Selections will be posted to the Southbury Historical Society's Website and Facebook page.

If you have questions or would like more information on the South Britain Public Library or its Book Club, please contact Robin Stiles at (203) 232-9874

From the Vault: You never know what you'll find buried deep within the archives...

Having lived in the area a little over a year now, I often wonder about the giant pillars jutting from the middle of the Housatonic River near the Silver Bridge between Sandy Hook and Southbury. Someone told me they were remnants of a former rail line, but I wanted to know the history. Imagine my delight when I found a file in the vault labeled, "Southbury Railroads." Of the multiple articles inside, there is one by Cindy Winters of the News-Times (Sunday, January 17, 1993) titled *The Tracks are gone, but not the memories*. Below the article is a photo of my beloved pillars.

Part of a line built by The New York and New England Railroad companies, the pillars are the remains of a 468-foot steel bridge that once traversed the Housatonic. The rail line officially opened in 1881 and ran from Hawleyville Junction in Newtown to Waterbury. Stations included Sandy Hook, Pomperaug Valley, Southbury, and Southford (the last stop before Waterbury). The rail line soon became the main source of transportation for local farmers moving livestock, crops, lumber, and coal between Danbury and Waterbury. Local businessmen used it to trade their wares and goods. Other residents used it for commuting to and from work or the occasional trip to the "big" cities.

Service from Danbury to Waterbury ended in 1937. In 1948, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) halted service between Hawleyville and Southbury and the rail line was abandoned. Local farmers and businessmen hired an attorney and fought to keep the line intact, but it was a losing battle with interstate highway plans in the works. Removal of the bridge began on January 28, 1949 and the rail lines taken up soon after.

I am happy to finally know a little more on the history of the pillars that I see almost every day. I invite readers to visit the many train museums that are located throughout Connecticut – a quick internet search shows no less than six. The Historical Society is equally lucky to have an experienced local train engineer speak at our annual meeting on May 17. I look forward to an even more in-depth look at Connecticut's great railway system, now and then.

Kimberly Neuenschwander
Archivist



39TH ANNUAL MEETING TO BE HELD AT BENT OF THE RIVER AUDUBON CENTER

Sunday, May 17 from 1 – 3 PM

This year's speaker is Peter McLachlan of Newtown. An experienced railway engineer, Peter spent most his career working on Connecticut's rail system and with the Danbury Railway Museum. He was featured in the 1978 Thomas Berry documentary, "Last Train to Pittsfield," which highlights the last passenger train ride along the Housatonic from Danbury, CT to Pittsfield, MA. His knowledge of trains is remarkable and spans many eras in train history — from freight and passenger rail to diesel and steam locomotives. Join us as Peter shares his often humorous personal stories of working on the Connecticut rail system. The meeting is open to the public and all are welcome to attend. Cost is \$25 per person and includes afternoon refreshments and transportation from the parking lot to the Audubon Center Barn. Registration is required. Additional forms are available at the Historical Society's website under Programs and Events.



The Barn at the
Audubon Center

The Southbury Historical Society

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Address Label

Save the Date!

- ⇒ **May 17, Southbury Historical Society Annual Meeting:** Meeting at the Audubon Center Barn at Bent of the River, 1—3 PM. Retired railway engineer Peter McLachlan is this year's speaker.
- ⇒ **May 19, South Britain Library Book Club:** The last meeting for the spring season. The book club will read and discuss Louis Bromfield's, *The Strange Case of Miss Annie Spragg*. The club will also choose the fall reading selection.
- ⇒ **May 25, Bullet Hill School Open House:** BHS is open on Memorial Day Monday from 12—3 PM
- ⇒ **June 13, Bullet Hill School Open House:** BHS will participate in CT Open House Day sponsored by CT Tourism. The school is open from 10—4 PM and will offer free colonial games for the children and a free building tour by costumed docents!
- ⇒ **July 12, Bullet Hill School Open House:** 12—2PM



Covered Bridge at Southford Falls,
Southford