



The Babcock-Smith House Museum Newsletter

Volume 12 Number 3

Fall 2016

Documentary Sparks New Discovery

A serendipitous viewing of *Carved in Stone* on Rhode Island PBS prompted Stephen Erikson to write to us about his grandfather, Mathia (Matthew) Portaluppi, who was a sculptor for the Columbia Granite Company operated by the Monti family. Portaluppi created the clay model for the Monti Angel in River Bend Cemetery. Erikson's father, an amateur photographer, snapped a picture of the model sometime in the late 1930s or early 1940s.

Portaluppi was born in Acrisate, Italy and attended both Les Beaux Arts in Paris and an art school in Cologne, Germany. As a young sculptor, he carved several statues on the Milan Cathedral. He immigrated to the United States in 1912 and he married Elizabeth (Isabella) Miniero in 1916. The young couple moved to Westerly so that Matthew could find work as a sculptor.



Mathia Portaluppi and Isabella Miniero on their wedding day in 1916.

Elizabeth was very homesick and the couple eventually moved closer to her home in East Greenwich. During the Depression, Matthew built their new home on Main Street in

East Greenwich where he set up his own monument business next to the house. The photo of the Monti Angel was taken in his work shed.

Erikson shared a few stories about his grandfather:

I heard many stories about my grandfather over the years. In terms of the Monti Angel, I remember that my mother posed for her father when he was making the clay model. She would always say how difficult it was to hold her arm up for so many hours as Matthew sketched and then modeled the clay.

As the story goes, Matthew asked his brother Emilio, a skilled statue cutter, to come help pick out the granite block that would be used to cut the final statue and to help oversee the granite carving. Emilio understood the physical properties of granite very well and advised Matthew that the pink granite was too difficult to carve for that statue. At the very least he recommended a more compact sculpture.



Clay model of the Monti Angel in the work shed of sculptor Mathia Portaluppi.

Emilio was practical and very experienced. Matthew was a true artist who always had to push the envelope to the limits. The brothers' ensuing arguments were loud and legendary. My grandmother would cover her ears when she told the story many years later.

In the end, Emilio lost the argument about the pink granite, but he did accompany his brother to oversee the clay model's ride to Westerly for casting and the statue's being carved from the pink Westerly granite. My grandmother was relieved that the clay model had arrived in Westerly without incident. She never knew what happened to the plaster cast of the angel.

Tidbits

- Peter Thalman of Hollingsworth, MA sent information and photos of his great grandfather Denis Keenan and his grandfather William Keenan, who were both blacksmiths. Denis immigrated from Ireland in 1832 and worked locally; William worked at the Newall stone-cutting shed. We often forget how important blacksmiths were in keeping the tools sharpened for the men working both in the quarries and in the sheds.
- In addition, Bill Mitchell, who was visiting from Florida, stopped in to say that he was preparing a packet of photos, genealogy and ephemera about his grandfather who came from Dalbeattie, Scotland.
- Several folks have used our files to add to their knowledge about relatives who worked in the granite industry.
- The Westerly Artists' Cooperative kicked off their new Westerly Arts Cafe series, featuring coffee and cookies by local vendors and a showing of *Carved from Stone*, followed by a Q and A session. We are always surprised and pleased by the questions which the DVD sparks.
- A fortuitous chance contact at the Gallery with the husband of Annie Philbrick, owner of the new Savoy Bookshop and Café, has resulted in its now carrying our book. Shoppers will be pleased that they can now purchase the book there in addition to Classic Framers and the Museum itself.
- The Museum has replaced its twelve-year-old laptop. New speakers, which we have used on the road and for our in-house programs, make sure that people in the back of the room can hear sound from a video or DVD. We also have a new back-up power system for the computer so that the computer stays on during power outages, and trustees can work from home with the assurance that the computer will be accessible.
- Harry Bjorkland donated, fitted, and installed a set of cabinets and accompanying countertop (which resembles granite) for our office. With any luck, we will keep the counter clear to be used for projects.
- This is the second season in which tour guides have volunteered to give tours on a set day all season long, accompanied by a changing group of people who staff the store or welcome visitors at the Carriage House. By all accounts, this system has worked well; so thanks to Meg Barclay, Tony Smith, Ed and Carol Fazio, and Mary Ann McCarty.
- David Read has finished painting one side of the Museum house. We have replaced some upstairs window trim in the resident manager's apartment and repaired the lightning rods.
- Dr. Allen Leadbetter's *Gall Stones Not Granite* provided a wonderful contrast to the "stone" programs which we often feature. In it he presented the anatomy and physiology of the gall bladder, the history of gallstone surgery, and two videos showing open and laparoscopic cholecystectomy. He shared his story of being in Grand Cayman scuba diving and meeting a woman who had had the laparoscopic surgery in Oklahoma just two days before. That meeting spurred him to learn how to do the surgery; as a result, he performed, here in Westerly, the first laparoscopic removal of the gall bladder in the state of Rhode Island.
- The video of his program, along with the recent programs of Meg Barclay on Westerly's early history and John Coduri's on the Bonner Monument Company can be accessed from the home page of our website: babcocksmithhouse.org. In addition, Charlene Senical's program on Mary Noyes Rogers, which she gave at the Westerly Public Library, is also online.
- Remember to use Smile.Amazon.com to benefit the museum when you do your holiday shopping. Select "Trust U/Will of Orlando R. Smith" under the "Your Account" dropdown tab.

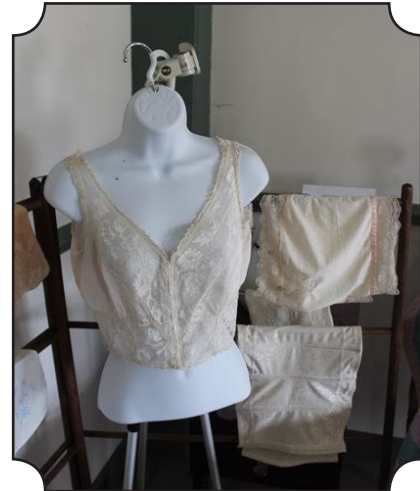


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Victorian Secrets Tea and Exhibit



Maggie Finaly models petticoat with bustle back.



Lacy camisole highlights the feminine.



Victorian undies festoon the parlor.



Stays promote good posture.



Docents Barbara Monahan, Pat Riddle, Meg Barclay, Marge Duerr, Wanda Butler and Jackie Brennan serve guests tea and goodies.



Faux underwear on clothesline attracts visitors.



Any Ideas?

Background of the mystery: when we were setting up the Plaster Model Exhibit in the Isaac Smith Room, we had to choose which plaster models from our large collection to use. It was easy to choose some, as we had certain themes in mind such as oak leaves, flowers, and corner treatments. A few stood alone, such as the maquette for a New Jersey early dignitary. We brought the models up from storage in the basement; Tony Smith and Ed Fazio dusted each one off, discovering that some had been painted, some showed varied coloration and some were the original plaster color.

One large one, about two feet by three feet, did not blend stylistically or chronologically with the others because it appeared to have been done in the late thirties or early forties. It was probably not done by the Bonner Monument Company, source of many of the models in the collection.

The intriguing model features a series of bas relief sketches. In the middle is a solitary "L." On the left: a canoe and an Indian pointing towards the center "L," a surveyor with a tri-cornered hat, a wagon train drawn by oxen, and a circa 1940 truck. On the right: an Indian pointing towards the center "L" wearing a full headdress with perhaps a dog sledge (?), a Pony Express rider, a stagecoach drawn by horses, and a circa 1940 car. On each side is a Native American dwelling.

The relief seems to feature transportation and communication, and perhaps divides the East and the West. We are looking for theories about its *raison d'être*. With your help and some luck, we can discover the completed project. We would be happy to make an appointment if you would like to do a close examination. Email Linda Chaffee at Lchaffee@cox.net.

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Docent Field Trips



At the Avery-Copp House (left to right): Donn Barclay, Tony Smith, Meg Barclay, Wanda Butler, Jan Tunney, Carol Fazio, Mary Brunelle, Mary Ann McCarty, and Donna Mills. The Avery-Copp house was built circa 1800 on the banks of the Thames River in Groton, CT.



Avery-Copp docents made a return visit in September. Left to right: Kathy Leuze, Archivist; Leslie Evans, Museum Director; Natalie Livingston, Museum Assistant.

Plaster Model Exhibit



Ed Fazio puts finishing touches on the exhibit of plaster models, mostly from the Bonner Monument Company.

Granite Updates

- The Town of Westerly is considering buying the former Sullivan Quarry in Bradford which abuts land which is already preserved. As part of the decision-making process, 60 local, state and federal officials toured the site in late August. A photo in *The Westerly Sun* showed the officials dwarfed against the 100-foot quarry face, as dramatic today as it was years ago.
- Harold Buzzi, 86, who took over Buzzi Memorials from his father Angelo in 1964, has sold the Stonington business to Richard Brooks, who trained under Richard Comolli and Robert Greene at the Comolli Granite Co. Brooks intends to update the space and tools and, once again, sell memorials from the site. Buzzi and his father were known for their designing, carving, and sandblasting, with the elder Buzzi's work found on buildings all over the country.

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Upcoming Events

At the Carriage House. Not-yet members \$5.00; members free unless otherwise noted.



Coopering: the Art of Making Barrels

Sunday, November 13, 2016 at 2 pm

Presented by Sam Pierson, volunteer cooper at Mystic Seaport

Babcock-Smith House Holiday Festival ***Saturday, Sunday, December 3, & 4***

Saturday, 9 am-1 pm

Celebration of Trees*

Joshua's Store and Bazaar

Sunday, 2-4 pm

Holiday Concert featuring Tenor Michael Grillo; refreshments following the concert

Celebration of Trees* from 2:45-5 pm

Joshua's Store

*Celebration of Trees: Donation accepted; free for children under 12. Sunday afternoon includes admission to both the concert and Celebration of Trees.



Reconstruction after the Civil War: What Went Wrong?

Sunday, January 8, 2017 at 2 pm

Presented by Judge Frank Williams, noted Lincoln scholar