

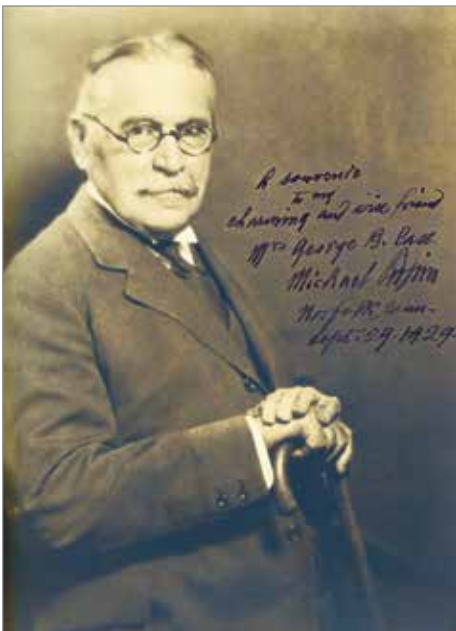
Newsletter of the NORFOLK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

2024 SUMMER

NORFOLK, CONNECTICUT

A HAVEN OF HAPPINESS

Inventor Michael Pupin in Norfolk, CT



Michael Pupin (1858–1935) first came to Norfolk in 1896 to recover from pneumonia and the untimely death of his wife. His colleague at Columbia Dr. Frederic Dennis had suggested that the bracing climate and beauty of the northwest Connecticut hills would be therapeutic for body and soul, his family having summered in Norfolk for years. A brilliant physicist and professor in the Department of Electrical Engineering, Pupin had by then a revolutionary

invention to his name. He discovered that short exposure x-ray photographs could be made from secondary x-radiation, which revolutionized medical treatment. A few years later, studying electrical charges, he developed the Pupin coil which, when spaced properly along telephone circuits, reinforced vibrations and made long-distance telephone possible.

Although he would go on to obtain 34 patents for his inventions, achieving world renown, Norfolk remained his “haven of happiness,” as he described it in his autobiography. This man, who had arrived at age 16 a penniless immigrant from Serbia; who had worked on farms and in factories, learned English, and earned a scholarship to Columbia; who went on to study mathematical physics and physical chemistry at Cambridge University, receiving his doctorate from the University of Berlin in 1889; who spent his professional career at Columbia where the Pupin Physics Laboratory is named after him; this man considered Norfolk his home.

He spent that first summer in a rented house at the foot of Haystack Mountain and the following summer at

the Curtiss Farm on Mountain Road. Dr. Dennis gave him a pair of chestnut cobs, a product of his stud farm, to train to harness. Everybody in Banat, Serbia, raised horses, and Pupin credited his mental and physical recovery to this activity. Before long, the construction of his new summer residence, the Knolls (1898), on Westside Road and its macadamized serpentine driveway became the talk of the town, and the object of hand-colored postcards (see page 8). Within the decade, a force of Italian stone workers was gathering stone between the railroad tracks and Westside Road for a new larger residence, stable, conservatory and other buildings on an estate that would be known as Hemlock (Hill) Farm.

Pupin cared deeply about Norfolk and contributed financially to several important projects, including the construction of the Royal Arcanum building in 1903 and the new Center School in 1915. He campaigned for the replacement of dirt roads with macadamized ones, which he knew would entice future summer residents and contribute to the town’s prosperity. With his close friend Helen Hartley Jenkins, he established Hemlock Hill Farms (incorporated in 1913) to buy property, mainly farmland, and

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HIS AMERICAN HOME: Pupin's Hemlock Hill Farm

by Andra Moss



While some in Norfolk may not know the name Pupin, most have stopped at some point to exclaim and wonder over the elaborate, unusual architecture of the “Pupin castle” on Westside Road.

In 1897, Pupin purchased more than 60 acres running along both sides of Westside Road and commissioned the firm of Hill and Turner to construct a summer home. The Manhattan-based architects had recently embraced the new concept of the apartment house, and their design style veered enthusiastically from Beaux Arts to Neo-Renaissance detailing. A Connecticut country home built to evoke a Serbian getaway would pose no problem, and “The Knolls” was quickly completed within a year.

Pupin next set his sights on his childhood dream of having his own farm. In 1905 he hired a colleague from Columbia University, noted Pittsburgh architect Henry Hornbostel, to fashion a multi-building estate across the road from The Knolls. Its centerpiece would

be a grand stone mansion, with elements of folk architecture, crafted in a Serbian style by Italian stone masons.

Other artisans contributed to the home’s elaborate interior. American-born, Paris-educated artist William de Leftwich Dodge, one of the premier muralists of his day, painted eight separate murals depicting the life of Ulysses in ceiling panels above the home’s striking circular entry staircase. Completed in 1907, Hemlock Hill Farm would become Pupin’s beloved summer retreat for nearly three decades.

Writing in Washington D.C.’s *The Evening Star* newspaper on Nov. 14, 1924, on the occasion of Pupin’s retirement as President of the American Association of Science, Robert Edgren took the opportunity to comment on the symbiosis of the man and his home.

“Pupin is in every way a man of striking individuality,” Edgren wrote. “Genuine, kindly, widely informed, he is patient in explaining scientific

matters to the uninitiated. Prof. Pupin’s house at Norfolk, Conn., is a Serbian castle of stone, as unlike any other house as its owner is unlike any other man. Besides a fine pipe organ, the house contains sculptures and mural decorations emblematic of Serbian life, and no experience could be more interesting or more stimulating to the mind than to visit that picturesque establishment and listen to the conversation of its master. . . .for Michael Pupin is not only a great scientist and a man of great intellect, he is a man of great soul.”

When he died in 1935, Prof. Pupin’s estate was said to be worth in excess of \$1 million. A small legal controversy ensued, as at some point Pupin had made, but later destroyed, a will that would have left most of his fortune to Columbia University. His only child, Varvara, born in 1889, contested those claims and the courts found that he had died intestate, meaning that Hemlock Farm passed to her.

Although there are reports of Varvara Pupin enjoying many summers in Norfolk as a young woman of wealth and social prominence (she even eloped with her riding instructor one June day in 1911), shortly after her father's death she sold Hemlock Farm. Records show the assignment of its mortgage on May 11, 1939.

Further, the *Waterbury Evening Democrat*, on June 15, 1939, reported that the "national headquarters of the Catholic Boys Brigade has announced the purchase of the 63-acre estate of the late Prof. Michael I. Pupin at Norfolk as a summer camp for boys from all parts of the East. Boys will be admitted without any distinction as to race or religion. ... This camp is to be known as 'Tall Timbers' and will have five periods during this summer."

The article described that "The estate, built at a cost of \$360,000, was entirely renovated in 1936 and is in excellent condition. There are many buildings on the property, and accommodations for a large number of boys. [Prof. Pupin's] daughter, Mrs. Varvara Pupin Smith, of New York, will serve as a member of the board of directors of 'Tall Timbers.' The camp will be conducted as a memorial to Prof. Pupin." Mentions can be found in that same paper through 1940 of "local boys who are at Camp Tall Timbers in Norfolk."

However, by May 1943 (perhaps due to wartime), the property was once again sold. In October 1944, new owners Stuart and Susan Boyd Olsen took ownership and moved with their two young children, Charles and Kaaren into "the castle." Kaaren Olsen, now living in Branford, Conn., was two years old when the family moved into the house. She said that they also owned a large white house across Westside Road that her father rented to "the Hitchcock furniture family."

"A lot of the memories I have of

our house," she said, "are as a kid playing hide and seek in all the buildings. There was one that contained all kinds of sleighs and old buggies. We raised horses. We had six horses, and my dad would hitch Bud and Bernie to the sleigh, and we'd go up and down the streets picking up neighbors to go for a ride during the snowstorms."

Olsen recalled many special rooms of the fine home: "Inside the house there was a lot of hand-carved wood. The library had carved bookcases with glass fronts. There was a solarium that my mother filled with plants. She also had magnificent gardens outside." Olsen described "two bronze plaques over the fireplaces in the dining room and living room" that, she remembered, "were created by a well-known artist from Serbia. They were very large, cast-bronze relief panels of around three feet by five feet each."

She had especially vivid memories of the living room, which Olsen said they called "the music room because

it had a Steinway piano and an organ that was absolutely beautiful. It had three tiers of keys and a roller to play on its own. Its pipes were installed throughout four different rooms. When my father sold the house, he took the pipes and the organ out of the house and sold them for \$25,000."

When Hemlock Hill Farm was sold in 1958, the next owners, the Society of Brothers in Connecticut (also called the Bruderhof), did not view themselves as stewards of the historic property. Instead, the Bruderhof, a Christian sect that renounces worldly goods and lives communally, valued the farm's acreage and many buildings. They named their Norfolk community the Deer Spring Bruderhof, and the stone mansion on Westside Road was turned into residential quarters for a number of families. As Kaaren Olsen recalled, "The day we moved out, I was told that 125 people moved into the house."

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MILESTONE

This summer marks the 25th year that Ann Havemeyer and Barry Webber have collaborated on mounting annual exhibitions. Ann joined the Board of Directors in 1989 and, upon Alice Waldecker's retirement, took over the job of curator. In 1996 the Society received a grant from the Connecticut Humanities Council to undertake a major collections assessment project. Ann spearheaded a comprehensive inventory and evaluation of the collections and the organization of an archival storage system to ensure its long-term care and preservation. Almost 30 years later, cataloging the collection (18,500 artifacts) remains an ongoing process. Barry joined the Board of Directors in 1998 and jumped right in, designing *A Stitch in Time*, an exhibition of Norfolk quilts and samplers. He became president in 2000 just in time for the celebration of the Society's 40th anniversary. Their collaboration has extended to working on four museum publications and receiving seven awards of merit, locally and nationally, for their work. A hearty congratulations to Ann and Barry!



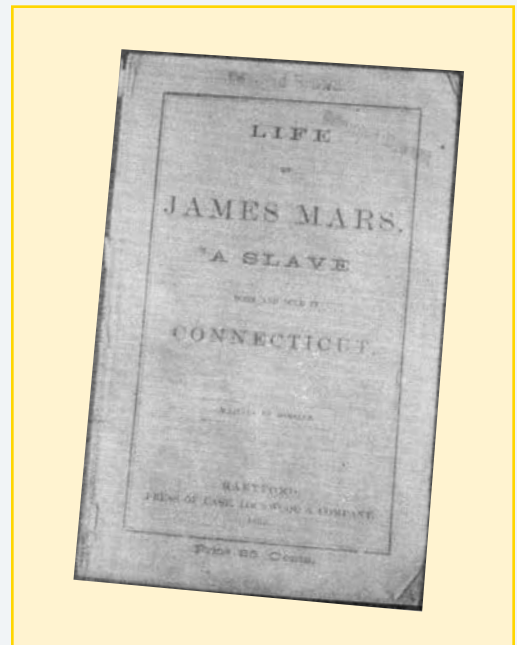
Update from the Executive Director

I FIND MYSELF WONDERING what happened to 2023? The year just seemed to fly by even faster than usual. We had a fun and productive year and a tremendous response to the exhibition *Shedding Light: 200 Years of Art & Music in Norfolk* (read Michael Kelly's Varnishing Day article on page 5 for an excerpt from the exhibition). The highlight for me was the recorded session I did with three Yale Art School alumni. Thanks to Zoom, we were able to connect Norfolk, North Adams, Ohio, and Edinburgh, Scotland, for a conversation and reminiscences about the summer of 1971—if you missed it, the video is on our website.

How fortuitous it was that we were contacted by relatives of the Stoeckel family just as we started working on the art & music exhibition. Gustave Stoeckel was the first director of music at Yale, through the influence of the Battell family, and the gift included portraits of three generations, including the one of Irene Larned Stoeckel that was on display last summer. We also received and were able to display a wonderful folio of architectural photographs of Battell House, as it was renovated by Alfredo Taylor. These were taken in the 1930s by renowned architectural photographer Samuel Gottscho.



Irene Larned Stoeckel 1872 by Ulysses D. Tenney



Highlights of the past year included a \$6000 operating grant from the Connecticut Humanities Council. These funds, awarded for a second year, helped offset our annual operating costs and have been a great boost to our bottom line. We also received a three to one matching grant from the Nellie Mae Foundation through the generosity of a local donor. This is the third installment of the grant which will be used to reprint the 1864 autobiography of James Mars, the last slave bought and sold in Connecticut. This printing will be an update to the one the NHS undertook more than 30 years ago, and we hope it will bring a fresh outlook to this very important story.

Membership continues to grow, and we are very grateful for your continued generosity. With your help, we are able to procure and preserve artifacts and records related to Norfolk's history and present interpretive exhibitions illustrating that history.

Barry Webber
Executive Director

Varnishing Day at the Norfolk Country Club

By Michael Kelly



In the mid-1700s, artists in London established a tradition of previewing their latest paintings by hosting a Varnishing Day to which they invited art patrons, dealers and fellow artists. Ostensibly, these artists would put the finishing touches to their latest works and apply a transparent varnish to preserve the paintings but, in reality, it was an excuse to have a reception and party to celebrate the artists and their work and to, perhaps, sell some of their new paintings. Famed atmospheric marine painter J.M.W. Turner became identified with Varnishing Day due to his penchant for dramatic last minute studio entrances, whereupon he made changes to his monumental works while fellow artists and invited guests watched in awe. Varnishing Day, at least in name, is still held every year at the Royal Academy in London (as it has been since 1769) to kick-off their acclaimed summer exhibitions.



Portrait of Jane Clark Byers by Ann Curtiss Scoville

Who would have imagined? Almost 90 years ago, on September 12, 1935, in the depths of the Great Depression, the Norfolk Country Club hosted its own Varnishing Day followed by a largely forgotten four-day *Norfolk and Neighborhood* art show in the clubhouse. The exhibit was open to the public daily from 10-6 for a \$1.00 entrance fee, and newspaper articles claimed that this exhibit would put Norfolk and the surrounding area 'on the map' of important American art colonies.

It is interesting enough that the NCC staged this significant exhibit, but even more intriguing is how ambitious it was: 90 works of art by 41 artists, many of them well-known and quite successful in the art world of the early decades of the 20th century. The art committee itself was made up of a core of significant American artists of the era, such as Guy Pène du Bois and Ernest Lawson.

Many of the prominent artists were New Yorkers who had studios in Connecticut—in Norfolk, Salisbury, Cornwall, Old Lyme, Stonington and Falls Village, which, at the time, was a thriving art colony. Some were members of the Kent Art Society, founded in 1923, which co-sponsored the exhibit. To give a sense of the stature of the artists represented in the Norfolk Country Club art exhibit, below are a few biographical sketches.

Guy Pène du Bois (1884–1958)—popular, well-regarded realist painter, art critic and teacher who, along with Edward Hopper, George Bellows and Rockwell Kent, studied under Ashcan School founder, Robert Henri

Childe Hassam (1859–1935)—recognized as a premier American Impressionist of his time, famous for his pastoral paintings of idyllic seaside scenes and his series of Fifth Avenue flag paintings

Ernest Lawson (1873–1939)—American Impressionist, sometimes referred to as the founder of the Harlem River School. Lawson was one of the Eight, the realist genre painters who were also called the Ashcan School. The only landscape painter among the Eight, he had a preference for painting winter scenes along the Hudson and Harlem Rivers. He spent the summers of 1933 to 1935 at Knolly Brook, the summer residence of Dr. Edward Skiddy Quintard, who remodeled his barn/studio as an exhibit space for Lawson's work, including several views of Norfolk.

Ezra Winter (1886–1949)—internationally-known American muralist

Ellen Emmet Rand (1875–1941)—known for portraits of prominent Americans; painted the official White House portrait of Franklin Roosevelt

Rex Brasher (1869–1960)—pre-eminent wildlife illustrator of the 20th century

Arthur Covey (1877–1960)—muralist known for painting industrial workers, such as his 1937 WPA murals of abolitionist John Brown (on display in Torrington, CT central post office)

Hemlock Hill from page 3

The Bruderhof built many additional buildings on the property, including manufacturing facilities for the commercial production of wooden toys and furniture.

Continued Olsen, “Probably about 30 years ago, I took a friend to see the house. A senior person at the Society of Brothers invited us in. It was just a shock. The Brothers had taken my parent’s bedroom—it was gigantic—and made six bedrooms out of that one room.”

While Olsen recalled that “the Brothers had covered up a lot of the woodwork, one thing that hadn’t changed was the front door and entryway with the spiral staircase. Up above that, at one time were eight murals of Ulysses’ life that Pupin had installed. I was told that a priest stole one mural out of the house before our family moved in. So, when we lived there, there were only seven murals. The Society of Brothers had children paint over them.” [Note: The Bruderhof painted scenes on paper which was placed over the murals.]

The Bruderhof community remained on Westside Road for nearly 40 years. In 1998 the property was sold to the Mission of Tao Confucianism,

which transferred it in 2016 to the Confucian Study Association for a planned Connecticut-Asia Cultural Center. Kaaren Olsen made another visit to her former home for the 2022 opening of the cultural center. She recalled the thrill of seeing her childhood window as she approached. Also still standing guard were two original pink granite pillars at the front entryway that Pupin had sourced from a quarry in Stony Creek, Conn.

But overall, said Olsen, while “the current owners were just absolutely lovely,” seeing the condition of the once-grand estate was disheartening. “The current owners are trying to bring the house back, though,” she said. “The ceiling in the music room used to be gold leaf over the mural in the ceiling, surrounded by a magnificent frame. That’s all gone, but they are trying to replicate the woodwork around it.” Olsen shared with them photos of the property and related that “some of the pictures of me as a child are now in a room dedicated to the history of the house.”

To Olsen, “Michael Pupin was a genius. As a kid, you don’t appreciate or even think about those things, but as I grew older, it was just fascinating going back and looking at his life

and the man that he was.” Hemlock Hill Farm, Pupin’s memory of Serbia brought to life in Norfolk, may be battered, but to Olsen, “the castle was my house. Only as I grew up did I realize how much more special it was.”

Pupin from page 1

make extensive repairs to the farm buildings. The company acquired some 1800 acres, one tract in Grantville, a large tract in the north part of town with Wood Creek and its water rights, and 500 acres not far from the center of town.

Michael Pupin made a fortune through his inventions; he sold his patent for the induction coil to AT&T for a half million dollars. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1924 for his autobiography *From Immigrant to Inventor* (Charles Scribners, 1923). To celebrate the centennial of this award, our summer exhibition tells the story of this extraordinary man.

Ann Havemeyer
Curator

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

June 1—October 13 *A Haven of Happiness: Inventor Michael Pupin in Norfolk*
Open weekends and by appointment

August 3 and 4 **Weekend in Norfolk**
Saturday 12–4:00 Gallery Talk at 2:00PM
Sunday 1:00–4:00

September/October **Historic House Dinner** TBA

December 7 **10th Annual Cake Auction** with John Fernandez, Auctioneer

*The Norfolk Historical Museum is open Saturdays and Sundays from 1:00 to 4:00 P.M.
June through October and by appointment, 860-542-5761.*

Cake Auction, a Continuing Success!

Our 9th annual cake auction was attended by an enthusiastic crowd. Thanks to auctioneer Grady Cooley, we raised a record-breaking amount from the sale of 13 cakes. The mouthwatering confections and bakers were: Humming Bird Cake, Jennie Brown; Lemon Drizzle, Jill Chase; Trio of Bundt Cakes, Walter Godlewski; Red Velvet Cake, Tom Hlas; Chocolate Ganache Cake, Hartley Mead; Buche de Noel, Marie-Christine Perry; Earl Gray Cake, Serena Ratcliffe; Carrot Cake, Melissa Robinson; Cake Painting, Turi Rostad; Classic English Christmas Cake, Alyson Thomson; Tiramisu Cake, Caryn Trager. A big Thank You to all our talented bakers and buyers!

Stay tuned as we welcome back auctioneer John Fernandez for the 10th (can you believe it) Annual Cake Auction on December 7, 2024, which will be even bigger and better to celebrate another milestone this year!



Membership Form

The Norfolk Historical Society cordially invites your support through membership. You will receive our newsletter, free admission to programs such as our popular Walks Through History, and invitations to special events.



Name(s) _____

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Please check one: ☐ New ☐ Renew Membership Year: 2024 season

☐ Family & Friends \$25

☐ Supporting \$50–75

☐ Donor \$100–\$300

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☐ Additional Gift of Support _____

Membership dues are tax-deductible contributions.

Please visit www.norfolkhistoricalsociety.org to pay online or mail your check payable to:
Norfolk Historical Society, P.O. Box 288, Norfolk, CT 06058



The impressive macadamized driveway to the first house Pupin built on Westside Road was a popular subject for postcards. The local paper reported: "The house is reached by a finely constructed drive which is unexcelled in Litchfield County and winds in graceful curves from the West Road to the tasteful grounds surrounding Professor Pupin's home."

Contributors/Editors:

Ann Havemeyer, Michael Kelly, Andra Moss, Barry Webber

Design Layout: Melinda Belter

The Norfolk Historical Society
13 Village Green
P.O. Box 288
Norfolk, CT 06058-0288