

Twenty-second Annual Membership Meeting Minutes
of the Ridgefield Historical Society
on October 17, 2023 in person and via Zoom

1. The Twenty-second Annual Membership Meeting was called to order by Ridgefield Historical Society President Tracy Seem at 5:01 p.m. on Tuesday, October 17, 2023.

Twenty-four RHS Board members and RHS members attended this RHS 2022-23 Annual Meeting. RHS Board members attending in person and via Zoom included: Stephen Bartkus, Sara Champion, Phil Esser, Kevin Julier, Geoff Harrington, Sue Law, Steven March, Ray Murphy, Betsy Reid, Nancy Rowe, Sally Sanders, Tracy Seem, Nancy Selander, Kip Shibli, and Laurie McGavin Bachmann.

2. Approval of Minutes from the 2022 Annual Meeting

The minutes of the 2022 annual membership meeting were approved unanimously without amendment. President Tracy Seem then gave the year-end review, which covered the fiscal year July 1, 2022, to June 30, 2023 (ending October 2023).

Annual Report to be on the Website

President Tracy Seem reported that the entire year-end review given at the RHS Annual Meeting on October 17, 2023, complete with images, will be uploaded to The Ridgefield Historical Society's website.

3. RHS Year-end Review 2022-2023— ending October 2023 was given by President Tracy Seem

President Tracy Seem began this year-end review by stating the Ridgefield Historical Society's Mission Statement:

Mission:

The Ridgefield Historical Society's purpose is to preserve, interpret and foster public knowledge of Ridgefield's historical, cultural and architectural heritage.

President Tracy Seem stated that the purpose of this report is to summarize and highlight the strategic and tactical achievements of the Ridgefield Historical Society in pursuit of its mission. She reported that this past year had been extremely productive for the Historical Society as it continued to develop its team and its planning to support its mission to serve as a vital organization in the community.

She reported that the Historical Society began the year with a thorough board and staff assessment. The objective of the assessment was to take a critical, inward facing look at how we, the Ridgefield Historical Society, function on a day-to-day basis and to establish a strong strategic and operating plan for the next three to five years. This assessment was designed to help establish clear lines between operational responsibilities and high-level board oversight as well as establish clear goals and objectives for the future.

She stated that these goals included continuing to build a strong and effective board of directors and matching our staff to the growing needs of the organization. Ms. Seem reported that this year the Ridgefield Historical Society is delighted to announce the addition of the following key members to the staff:

Full-time Executive Director, Stephen Bartkus
Executive Assistant, Kendra Menary
Bookkeeper, Cathy Malloy

Financial and Committee Reviews:

Finance

President Tracy Seem reported that Finance Chair and Treasurer, Steven March, oversaw overall fiscal responsibilities this year which included: budgeting and financial planning, reporting, and monitoring, internal controls and accountability, transparency, and risk management and monitoring other risk management areas. She reported that this year the migration of financial data from QuickBooks on the laptop to QB implemented with an on-line ability to code and track all revenues and expenses in QB.

President Tracy Seem reported that an RHS Finance Committee was formed to draw proposed changes to short and long-term investment strategies and service providers. She stated that this committee had also been charged with updating the RHS investment policy for long-term investment accounts. She further reported that RHS bank accounts have been simplified into three accounts: operating, reserve and restricted. President Tracy Seem thanked Finance Chair and Treasurer Steven March and Bookkeeper Cathy Malloy for all of their hard work.

Ms. Seem then reported on the many grants RHS received this past year itemized below:

RHS Grants Received October 18, 2022 to October 17, 2023

CT Humanities Cultural Fund for Operating Support 2023 (January 2023): \$8,900

For general operational support.

Wadsworth Lewis (February 2023): \$2,000

For general operational support.

Ridgefield Thrift Shop (April 2023): \$10,000

To purchase new computers, scanner, TV, and network equipment.

CT Humanities Implementation Grant (June 2023): \$24,998

Two-year \$50,000 initiative in collaboration with Ridgefield CT Pride, and student volunteers from Ridgefield High School and the school's GSA Club to record, preserve, and share Ridgefield LGBTQIA+ stories which are underrepresented in the Ridgefield Historical Society's collection, to foster intergenerational conversation and increase civic pride and awareness.

Goldstone Internship Grant (May 2023): \$7,500

To hire four paid summer interns.

CT Humanities Summer at the Museum Grant (July 2023): \$1,000

To support public visitation to the Historical Society's collection over the summer.

Ridgefield Rotary (July 2023): \$2,500

To support hiring an architectural historian to get the Branchville Schoolhouse listed on the State Register of Historic Places.

National Park Service American Battlefield Protection Grant (August 2023): \$117,714

Two-year project to continue studying the Battle of Ridgefield here and in the British National Archives, including archaeology to learn more about the event and its participants. We thank Senator Blumenthal for his support and interest in our implementing this grant.

Constellation Community Champions Grant (October 2023): \$500

To support hiring an architectural historian to get the Branchville Schoolhouse listed on the State Register of Historic Places.

Membership

President Tracy Seem was proud to report that the RHS has a new Membership Chair, Tatjana Witzmann and that under her guidance the 2023 fall membership campaign was our largest targeted mailing to date. Over 1,000 letters were sent to the community at large. This mailing was followed by a press release, a series of eblasts and personal email reminders that were sent to promote the fall Membership Drive. According to Ms. Seem membership continues to grow each year due to an increase in yearly membership campaigns with targeted follow-up.

Ms. Seem stated that member benefits include priority registration and early access to ticket sales, an invitation to exclusive members-only events, discounts on paid programs and our gift shop. According to Ms. Seem current RHS membership for 2022-23 is 223.

Marketing and Publicity

President Tracy Seem reported that RHS has had another year of transitions, as the Ridgefield Historical Society begins a new era with an executive director and a growing list of programs and projects. According to Ms. Seem marketing and publicity have supported and promoted varied activities: from sharing information and hosting the Witness Stones Project installation at Scott House last November, to introducing and gaining an audience for our new Ridgefield History Club, initiated by executive director Stephen Bartkus (who handled a live Facebook feed for each session).

President Tracy Seem was also very proud to announce that RHS has been able to announce several important grants, including the National Park Service American Battlefield Protection

Program Phase 2 award, which drew U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal to the Scott House for an special announcement program and reception.

She stated that targeted press releases plus social media have been aimed at sharing the story of the Ridgefield Historical Society and the ways that our members, staff and Board help fulfill the mission of preserving and promoting Ridgefield history.

Ms. Seem reported that *The Scott House Journal*, which is presented and printed quarterly, takes into specific topics, from the work volunteers are doing with the Couch family collection to the lives of Ridgefielders during the Gilded Age (coinciding with the successful, sold-out Gilded Age Tea at Lounsbury House), to a curious 1925 court case uncovered in our archives.

Ms. Seem stated that the RHS following on Facebook continues to grow; with our average post engagement being over 3,500 and outreach close to 10,000 in the month of September 2023.

President Tracy Seem reported on a very exciting new marketing initiative. The Ridgefield Historical Society marketing team is taking the lead in preparing and sharing publicity materials for the 2023 Ridgefield Holiday Historic House Tour, (December 1 and 2) - a joint venture of the Ridgefield Historical Society with Tiger Hollow, Inc. – which had traditionally offered a tour without a partner.

Ms. Seem reported that Sally Sanders, Marketing and Publicity and Nancy Rowe, Marketing have been greatly aided by the work of Steven March, Finance Chair and Stacey Schibli, Fundraising Co- Chair (on behalf of RHS). She gave many thanks to Steven March for brokering this joint venture with Tiger Hollow, Inc. as well as creating the website that supports the event. Ms. Seem said we look forward to another busy year sharing the news of the Ridgefield Historical Society's initiatives.

Technology

President Tracy Seem reported that there have been many technology improvements for the RHS this year. Since the last annual meeting, the Technology team has been building upon the great work that had been done previously. She then reported that the primary focus areas of the Technology team over the past year have been:

• *A major upgrade of the PCs, scanners and networking infrastructure at Scott House.*

Thanks to a generous grant from the Ridgefield Thrift Shop, the Society was able to acquire 4 new HP state-of-the-art all-in-one desktop PCs, 2 new Lenovo laptop PCs, a scanning station for large format photo negatives and slides, a scanning station for large format documents (e.g., maps, posters, newspapers, etc.), a set of mesh WIFI routers (for fast, reliable WIFI networking) and a Roku smart TV (for use during Society meetings, exhibitions and other events).

The Society also upgraded its Internet connectivity and bandwidth by switching to a Comcast Xfinity Internet and Phone Business Service that supports download speeds of up to 1 Gigabits / second. The net result of this is an order of magnitude improvement in the productivity of the Society's staff, volunteers, and interns that can now leverage a fast, reliable network of state-of-the-art computers, scanners, and printers, etc. together with super-fast and reliable WIFI and Internet connectivity.

- Working with Betsy Reid and the Collections team to increase (and enhance) use of the PastPerfect Collection Management System. The use of the new HP all-in-one desktop PCs, Lenovo laptop PCs, and scanners, together with a fast, reliable WIFI network and an upgrade of the PastPerfect software (to a networked version of the software) meant that up to 6 staff, interns and /or volunteers could all use the PastPerfect Collection Management System at the same time. Previously, only 1 person could use the PastPerfect system at any one time! Amongst other things, this enabled the team to eliminate a backlog of the Collection-related information that needed to be entered into the PastPerfect system after the COVID-19 pandemic. The team is also able to scan in images (that are of excellent quality) of the many hundreds of large format photo negatives that have been donated to the Society by the former Korke Photographic Studio in Ridgefield.
- Making access to the online (external) and on-site (internal) collections information easier, and more widely known, useful and used. This included acquiring and installing a Networked version of the PastPerfect software so that the Collection information in the system can be accessed and updated via more than one PC, adding multimedia files (e.g., oral histories, audio / video recordings, etc.) to the PastPerfect system and then publishing these to the public-facing website, etc. so that they could be accessed by the public. 45 audio recordings of local veterans of World War 2 were digitized and had their content transcribed. The audio recordings and the associated transcripts were then published on the Society's publicly accessible online website, so that the public could listen to the audio recordings and read the transcripts of these WWII related oral histories.

The Board of Directors would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Jason Zides, Technology. Mr. Zides recently stepped down from the Board but is continuing to contribute to the technology-related efforts of the Society as an active volunteer.

Programming and Collaborations

President Tracy Seem reported on programming initiatives and RHS collaborations within the Ridgefield community.

Witness Stones - The Witness Stones Project worked with the Historical Society and East Ridge and Scott's Ridge Middle Schools to honor the lives of two of the five enslaved persons, Lidia and Quash, who lived in the Scott House during the 1700's. Collections did the research and provided the primary documents for the students to study. The brass plaques were installed in

the ground in front of the Scott House. There was a reception after the plaques were installed at the Scott House.

A Gilded Age Tea - The Ridgefield Historical Society and the Lounsbury House worked together to present a *Gilded Age Tea* at the Lounsbury House featuring a performance by Kandie Carle, "The Victorian Lady," along with tea and treats.

COVID-19 Memorial Tree Dedication - The ceremony included words and a plaque dedication by Ridgefield First Selectman, Rudy Marconi, and Pastor Beth Anderson of St. Andrew's Church in Ridgefield. The COVID-19 Memorial Tree was initiated by the Commission on Aging of Ridgefield and was generously donated by Steve Zemo of Ridgefield Apartments.

The Ridgefield History Club - A program of the Historical Society, started by Executive Director, Stephen Bartkus now meets regularly throughout the year to discuss the history of Ridgefield and all of its villages. The Ridgefield History Club is an informal story telling session (it's not a presentation or lecture) where everyone sits in a circle and shares memories related to a specific topic in Ridgefield's history. The discussions are recorded and cataloged in the Historical Society's archive to preserve the memories of all of Ridgefield's people, places, and events for future generations.

A JOURNEY: A One-Woman Musical with Kimberly Wilson - Presented by the Ridgefield Historical Society and in partnership with the Ridgefield Library. An in-person performance about the Black experience in American history. In this musical event, Kimberly Wilson represents seven women— including Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks — whose lives spanned hundreds of years and laid the foundation for future generations.

Official Taking Down of the 20th Anniversary Banner with Boy Scout Troop #76

Patriots & Loyalists in Olde Town Cemetery, featuring 27 graves of note - A self-guided tour with the Town of Ridgefield Graveyard Restoration Committee self-guided tour.

Life in Ridgefield - Before it Was Known as Such - A special program, held in collaboration with the Ridgefield Library featuring lecturer Drew Shuptar Rayvis, focused on early days — Life in the Eastern Woodlands and Life in the Connecticut Woods from the 1670s to the 1730s.

Hand-Cut Silhouettes - Annual program highlighting the artistry and talent of silhouette artist Deborah O'Connor.

Eccentric Women of Ridgefield - Co-presented with the Ridgefield Theater Barn and the Ridgefield Historical Society, the play was based on narratives created by Dr. Darla Shaw and adapted for the stage by Stephen Robbins and directed by Linda Seay.

Bennet's Pond State Park Walking Tour - Covered the history and people who once inhabited the Bennet's Pond area. The walk, which was researched and led by Benjamin Hume, covered

the history of the land with a focus on the Conley family who owned the largest in foil company in the world and established Outpost Farm, one of the largest estates in Ridgefield, totaling

more than 1,500 acres, which grew into one of New England's biggest nurseries in the 1920s and 1930s.

Battle of Ridgefield walking Tours – An annual event led by Darla Shaw.

Ballard Park Gardens Then and Now Lecture by Terry McManus, President of the Ridgefield Garden Club, presented in partnership with the Ridgefield Library and Ridgefield Historical Society.

Walking Tour of Ballard Park Gardens – In collaboration with the Ridgefield Library, presented by Terry McManus President of the Ridgefield Garden Club the day after her lecture.

"The Jeffersonians" by Kevin Gutzman - Presented at the Ridgefield Library, a program with Kevin R. C. Gutzman, author of *The Jeffersonians: The Visionary Presidencies of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe*. Presented in collaboration with the First Principles group.

Community Outreach with RHS tables at these locations:

Pride in the Park – Ballard Park

Summerfest – Main Street, Ridgefield

Cannon Grange Fair – Cannondale, Wilton

Ridgefield Historical Society Scholarship

President Tracy Seem reported that The 2023 Ridgefield Historical Society Scholarship was awarded to graduating senior, Kate Tebbe, at the Ridgefield High School Award Ceremony in June. The scholarship — founded in 2022 — encourages students to share their individual perspectives on our Town's history.

Internships

Ms. Seem stated that Ridgefield Historical Society offers two paid internships, through the support of the Goldstone Family Foundation and the Kasul Family.

The Kasuli Internship honors the memory of the late Georgianne Kasuli, a long-time member of the Board of the Ridgefield Historical Society. The *Goldstone Family Internship* is part of a program which supports the hiring of interns across several Ridgefield non-profit organizations. Both internships provide growth and learning opportunities for the intern, and a much appreciated 'extra set of hands' for the organization.

2023 Interns Included:

Sam Bazarian – Goldstone Family Foundation Intern – Sophomore Gettysburg College

Francesco Carro – Georgianne Kasuli Memorial Fund Intern - Junior University of Connecticut

Jane Prusko – Georgianne Kasuli Memorial Fund Intern - Ridgefield High School Senior

Sara Shepherd – Goldstone Family Foundation Intern – Sophomore Vassar College
Ainsley Hoemann – Volunteer Intern
Sebastian Utomo – Volunteer Intern

Volunteers

Ms. Seem noted that through RHS's continued community outreach efforts and programming, the RHS volunteer base continues to grow. She reported that she is delighted to have attracted so many new volunteers this past year including the increase of support through our High School students. RHS has continued to work with the Boys and Girls club and the National Charity League. According to Ms. Seem, volunteers continue to be the key to our success.

Peter Parley Schoolhouse

President Tracy Seem reported that The West Lane District/Peter Parley Schoolhouse increased its number of visitors this year, thanks in large part to volunteers Darla Shaw, B.G. Brown, and Barbara Kaplan, all retired teachers who came in to educate youngsters in the ways of early 19th Century district schools. Ms. Seem gave the following update:

"Mistress Shaw" and "Mistress Brown" hosted the three Farmingville Elementary School third grade classes on three mornings in the spring. Each session lasted about two hours and included singing, recitation, geography, vocabulary, "cyphering" and a taste of penmanship. There was even a recess period to explore some old-fashioned toys and a chance to ring the schoolhouse bell. "Mistress Kaplan" joined "Mistress Shaw" for a shorter program during the May "Last Sunday at the Schoolhouse" and gave guests a taste of early education. Darla Shaw returned in August to give a talk about Abigail Goodrich Whittlesey, the very accomplished sister of Peter Parley who was one of the first women editors and magazine publishers in the United States. Like her brother Samuel Griswold Goodrich (whose pen name was Peter Parley), all of her formal education was conducted at the West Lane District School.

A class from the Creative Children's Korner Preschool also visited in May and the five-year-olds enjoyed a short talk about the school and had many questions for their hosts, Jack, and Sally Sanders.

Ms. Seem noted that a group of home-schooled students will be coming to visit next spring and this November, a troop of Daisy Girl Scouts will visit the schoolhouse.

Ms. Seem reported that with the addition of a seasonal porta-potty, the Schoolhouse has been a better fit for groups of youngsters. She expressed gratitude for work done during the spring and summer by Geoff Harrington and Jack Sanders who filled in the bare dirt around the new grass. Pete Nichols also added a low step at the front porch to make access easier.

Ms. Seem reported the following: there was some damage to the roof during a spring storm which the town had repaired and the interior needs some painting where water came in. Last Sundays at the Schoolhouse continue to draw a steady visitor stream; signs posted on grounds are very effective at attracting visitors.

RHS Buildings and Grounds

President Tracy Seem reported that The Society now maintains three historic buildings and properties. These buildings include the David Scott House, The Peter Parley Schoolhouse, and a recent gift of a Bauhaus inspired post World War II property. This recent bequest will be maintained by the Historical Society and serve as a place for future educational programs, specifically geared toward Post WWII architecture, history and design.

Ms. Seem reported and thanked Geoff Harrington, our buildings and grounds chair, who has relentlessly looked after these properties by constant oversight and inspections. Maintenance from the past year includes the following:

David Scott House:

- Completed water drainage issues in the basement to ensure ongoing protection of historic documents.
- Completed replacement of undersized rear gutter and downspouts.
- Attended to installation & removal of window screens & storm windows as needed.
- Secured landscaping services as required.
- Attended to pruning and removal of vegetation encroaching on the parking lot.
- And, a myriad of small/incidental "fixes", improvements, requests as they occur throughout the year.

Peter Parley Schoolhouse:

- Arranged for the installation of the temporary toilet outside the schoolhouse.
- Installed a concrete walkway from the front door to the toilet.
- Arranged for the town to make minor repairs to the siding.
- Made minor repairs/adjustments to allow the school bell more freedom of motion.
- Arranged for the town Parks & Recreation crew to perform the landscaping, as needed.

Exhibits

Ms. Seem stated that as part of RHS's ongoing series of exhibitions from the archives, exhibitions this past year at Town Hall, The Scott House and online included the following:

- If These Walls Could Talk* - original shingles from the 1714 Scott House featuring hand-drawn designs and drawings from the Scott House's earliest inhabitants.
- Gilded Age; The Patrons and the Builders*
- Batte of Ridgefield Reenactment Weekend – A Photographic Journal by Bing Liem*
- In Memoriam, 9/11 at Town Hall*

Collections

Ms. Seem reported the following about RHS Collections:

- Collections worked with Chronicle Heritage to provide research about historic homes for the

new Historic Resource Inventory (HRI)

-The Witness Stones Project worked with the Historical Society and East Ridge and Scott's Ridge Middle Schools in November to honor the lives of two of the five enslaved persons, Lidia and Quash, who lived in the Scott House during the 1700's. RHS Collections did the research and provided the primary documents for the students to study. The brass plaques with the enslaved names were installed in the ground in front of the Scott House. (reported earlier)

-In the spring, Collections received a \$10,000 Thrift Shop grant for new PCs, laptops, scanner and monitor which expanded the use of Past Perfect software from one to six workstations including the vault. (as reported in depth previously in the Technology section)

-Summer Interns helped to catalog the large backlog of donations caused by the pandemic. They also organized our oral history collection of over 200 interviews. Twenty-five of the WWII oral history collections were digitized, transcribed and cataloged with the help of interns Sam Bazarian, Francesco Carro, Sara Shepherd, Jane Prusko and Sebastian Utomo.

-Work has begun on the Clarence Korke negatives. This collection has been stored in the vault uncatalogued for many years. Volunteer Keith Russell is working on digitizing this important collection of images of Ridgefield people, buildings and events that span 40 years; from 1950-1990.

-Avnish Primavera, a volunteer from the Ridgefield jobs program, works in collections once a week. He has been very helpful scanning images into our Past Perfect database.

-Ten volunteers continue to work on important donated collections from various sources such as Jesse Royce Landis- actress in plays and movies, George Rockwell -author of the History of Ridgefield, Bob Tulipani- lifelong resident of Ridgefield active in many civic organizations, and Eddie Pickett, Ridgefielder who fought and died at Gettysburg.

-Collections has managed to catch up to the backlog of accessions. There are still many items stored in the vault that have not been entered into PastPerfect, but we are making progress with them. This work relies heavily on the help of volunteers, and we hope to add more over the coming year.

The Architectural Archives Committee

President Tracy Seem reported that The Architectural Archives Committee was created in 2019 and seeks to collect architectural material for the Warren Arthur Architectural Archives at the RHS. Ms. Seem noted the following:

-Mrs. Mai Arthur has contributed funding for the creation of this new archive, named in honor of her late husband, Warren Arthur.

-In 2020 we used partial funding to purchase flat file cabinets to safely house collections. A space has been set aside in our archive for these materials. Outreach was undertaken in 2021 to seek materials from local architects but did not produce any substantive interest.

-In August 2023, local landscape architect Helen Dimos expressed an interest in joining the committee.

- In September 2023, researcher and President of the Ridgefield Garden Club, Terry McManus and architect Ruth Van Den Nieuwenhuizen also volunteered to join the committee. The committee hopes to meet in person during Thanksgiving 2023 to discuss programming initiatives.