MISSION STATEMENT
The Sharon Historical Society & Museum collects, preserves and shares Sharon’s stories, building bridges between the past, present and future through its collections, exhibitions, and programs.

Get a sneak peek of exhibits, new accessions, photos from the collection & more!

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Wed—Fri: 12pm - 4 pm
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DID YOU KNOW???
The coldest recorded winter in Connecticut was in 1943 with –32 degrees at Falls Village. To conserve heating oil as a result of WWII, the Center School was closed for six weeks!

Coley’s Toxins

With most contagious diseases now preventable, a cancer diagnosis probably strikes the most fear in people’s minds. But cancer treatment is making exponential progress, and talk of immunotherapy is regularly in the news. What is not so well known is Sharon’s deep connection to the man who made this possible a century ago!

In 1890, as a young doctor in private practice in New York, Dr. William Coley became interested in cancer when 17-year-old Bessie Dashiell, a close friend of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., came to him with an injured hand. Coley discovered a mass which proved to be a round cell sarcoma that soon spread through her body. Unable to save Bessie, he immersed himself in the research and treatment of cancer using the body’s own immune system. Rockefeller, who would become a lifelong friend, enthusiastically supported his research.

The following year, Coley joined the staff of the recently-founded New York Cancer Hospital—one of only two in the world dedicated to the treatment of cancer (and now known as the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center). The disease was little understood and greatly feared, with no successful treatment available. Coley quickly gained recognition for his unusual treatment approach.

He set out to prove that the body’s own immune system could be stimulated to attack cancer. Coley infected over 1,000 cancer patients with streptococcal bacteria, and as the immune system attacked the infection, it attacked the cancer in the process. The treatment, dubbed “Coley’s Toxins,” had good results, particularly in bone and soft-tissue sarcomas. Yet his treatment was met with skepticism and criticism by his peers. Contributing to its rejection was the fact that Coley had not followed clinical trial protocols. He was a physician first, his goal was to heal his patients, not conduct a reproducible experiment. “Coley’s Toxins” were entirely abandoned by oncologists once radiation therapy and chemotherapy were developed.

Continued on page 2
With his cancer work dismissed by the medical establishment, in 1901 he retreated to his country home in Sharon where he served on the staff of Sharon Hospital. Coley’s involvement with the hospital began in its earliest days and continued through his life. His presence on the staff boosted the prestige of the small rural hospital, and he set the bar high for those who followed, including his own surgeon son, Dr. Bradley T. Coley.

On April 16, 1936, Dr. William Coley passed away. An article in the Harlem Valley Times best sums up his impact on Sharon: “The memory of Dr. William Bradley Coley bring to all the sudden realization that this Sharon neighbor was an outstanding authority of world-wide renown in the profession of medicine and surgery. An eminent personage, both through research and practical effort, this detracted not a whit from the homely fellowship of a mighty fine New England neighbor. For many years he had been a resident of Sharon where he always took an active part in community activities...Undoubtedly the leading authority on the treatment of cancer, scourge of mankind and puzzle of medical men....He also ‘did things’ as a record of more than 17,000 operations during his career will testify...A full-life, rich in accomplishment, neighbors and associates cannot fail to have picked up some small spark from the mere act of association with the man or of knowing him.”

Coley’s daughter, Helen Coley Nauts, was determined to rescue her father’s legacy from obscurity after his death. Preparing his biography, she discovered a trove of his patient records and medical correspondence in their Sharon barn. She assembled some 1,000 case histories from the disorganized records. Helen taught herself what she needed to know, enlisted the help of doctors and wrote monographs that are still studied. In 1953, with a $2,000 loan from Nelson Rockefeller she established the Cancer Research Institute, which has grown into a global advocate for immunotherapy research. Helen dedicated her life to gaining recognition for her father’s work from the medical establishment until her death in 2001 at age 93.

Today’s interest in immunotherapy treatment and research has prompted vigorous new study of Coley’s work. In 2006 Dr. Edward McCarthy wrote: “The modern science of immunology has shown that Coley’s principles were correct and that some cancers are sensitive to an enhanced immune system....He was a model of the clinician-scientist, treating patients and using his practice to initiate research and build theories....William B. Coley, a bone sarcoma surgeon, deserves the title ‘Father of Immunotherapy.’ He was a man before his time, and he met with severe criticism. Despite this criticism, however, Coley stuck with his ideas, and today we are recognizing their potential value.”

One wonders how immunotherapy treatment of cancer was stunted by the rejection of “Coley’s Toxins.” Science is making up for that lost time. Today immunotherapy drugs such as Keytruda, used in the successful treatment of Jimmy Carter’s cancer, owe their success to the work of Dr. William Coley and to his daughter Helen.

—Marge Smith, Curator
**GALLERY SHS**

**Northlight Art Center 9th Annual Student Show**

January 19 – March 8

Come enjoy a broad variety of artworks created over the past year by students of all ages, including drawings, pastels, watercolors, acrylic and oil paintings, representing a wide range of subject matter. Northlight Art Center was founded in 2010 by Pieter Lefferts. Originally located in Sharon and now operating in Amenia, the center offers art classes for all ages taught by working professional artists in drawing, painting, photography and more.

"End of Season" by Paddy Rossbach

**The Art of Tomas Savrda**

March 16 – May 10

**Opening Reception Saturday, March 16, from 5-7PM**

Tomas is known for creations that are somehow charming and whimsical, but also distinctly edgy and thought-provoking. Constructed from wood, tin, stone, and found objects, his masks, mini-stage scenes, and free-standing kinetic sculptures look like they have tumbled from some nineteenth century cabinet of forgotten toys. Some are meditations on memory, innocence and isolation; others are traditional folk stories filtered through dreams. They are also beautiful.

"All You Need is Love"

**MAKING OUR MARK STATEWIDE**

Congratulations to Carol Ascher (center) for receiving the 2018 NWCT Arts Council CultureMAX Heritage Professional Award

Check out “Grating the Nutmeg Episode 66” for an interview with the curators of “Sharon Cures”

https://gratingthenutmeg.libsyn.com/
Thank you to our

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Smallpox Epidemic of 1784

Researching our current exhibit on medicine in Sharon, we came upon a section of Hillside Cemetery that had grave-stones that all bore the same inscription, “Died of the Small-Pox.” As we investigated who these people were, we discovered the story of two harrowing, yet transformative, months in Sharon’s history: the smallpox epidemic of 1784. This outbreak came at the tail end of a ten-year epidemic exacerbated by troops moving from town to town during the War for Independence. A few years before, in 1777, Sharon lost 30 residents to the disease. But 1784 was to be different. Townspeople would courageously face the disfiguring and often fatal disease with a new science: inoculation.

Smallpox is one of the most contagious diseases in human history. It can be spread by any contact, even through contaminated clothing. The townspeople of 1784 Sharon knew this, thus explaining why the stones, dating from November 1784 to January 1785, were all situated at what was at the time the far edge of the cemetery. Neighboring Cornwall was even more fearful of contagion, they had a remote cemetery just for smallpox victims. News of the success of smallpox inoculation among George Washington’s army undoubtedly reached Sharon by 1784. Yet, mirroring Washington’s own initial skepticism, many of the people of Sharon were wary of the treatment at first. Smallpox inoculation was done with a live virus—risky and controversial because it caused a mild case of the actual disease (hopefully only mild) and the inoculated remained contagious. It took the dramatic events of that winter to convince the residents to take a leap of faith.

It all started in upper Sharon. In the Connecticut Courant we find the following notice: “On the 20th of November last departed this life the wife of Mr. JOSEPH MERCHANT.” Mrs. Marchant had just returned from visiting friends in Massachusetts when she fell ill—very ill. She had a rash and high fever. Without the telltale pustules, the first doctor who saw her concluded it couldn’t be smallpox and the family went about their business and friends called to give comfort and aid to the household. She quickly worsened and a young doctor new to the town, Dr. Samuel Rockwell, was called in. Mrs. Marchant died within 30 minutes of his arrival.
The next day a troubled Rockwell consulted the experienced Dr. Simeon Smith about the case. He described the symptoms, particularly the flat spotted rash, and Dr. Smith concluded it was smallpox. "Upon this Doctor Smith rode up in person [to the Marchant house] and made particular enquiry of those who had been with her in the time of her sickness, and was fully satisfied it was small pox," it was written in a newspaper report. Dr. Smith told the household of the danger and warned them to prepare. But "they however paid very little attention, and made no suitable preparation against that terrible disease."

Her funeral was held that Sunday, with an unusually large crowd, including the family and friends already exposed to the disease. Smallpox germs were on the mourning family’s clothes and Mrs. Marchant’s casket was open at the gravesite. Dr. Smith knew what was coming and immediately began preparations with town officials.

Within weeks 40 people were infected. "This spread an alarm through the town, and as great numbers had been exposed, the [civil] authority and select-men gave authority for inoculation in all those places where there was any suspicion that the people had been endangered. A few days later the town assembled and granted liberty to inoculate in almost every part of the town..." states a December 16th report. Dr. Smith and Dr. Joseph Hamilton went about the processes of inoculation and quarantine. Many feared inoculation would make them come down with the disease, some even accused the doctors of spreading it so to profit on the sick. Yet Smith and Hamilton convinced most that inoculation was the town’s only chance to stave off the epidemic.

By mid-December, about 1,200 people had been inoculated. Only 18 of those inoculated died. The doctors’ claims had been proven. In late January Sharon Selectmen reported that: "The people, in general, appear to be impressed with a sense of the divine goodness, in providing a remedy to battle the rage and virulence of a disorder, that has proved so destructive to the human species."

We’ve identified 18 existing gravestones or records of smallpox victims from the epidemic of 1784, and an additional 5 very likely small pox because of deaths of other family members near the same date. Sedgwick tells us a “large number of children” died; not unexpected as infants and toddlers rarely survived. Those in their prime were struck down too. Perez Gay, age 49, a neighbor of Mrs. Marchant, died of smallpox on December 15th. Miss Elenor Jennings died December 22nd at 33. The Bates, John, 82, and Anna, 62, died a day apart, December 28th and 29th. Capt. Samuel Doty, a Sharon founding father, died at 70. The town lost too many that winter, yet could have lost so many more if not for inoculation. To see the graves of the victims of the 1784 epidemic, join us for a tour of Hillside Cemetery on March 30. And to learn more about this story, come to our annual meeting on April 13 for a lecture on the topic of epidemics in Sharon.

—Marge Smith & Susan Shepard, Exhibit Curators
Let Them Eat Cake!
Live cake auction & cocktail party
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June 28, 2019
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