



Docent Guide 2022

Welcome to the *Fairfield Museum and History Center*! Attached is a variety of informative material to help guide your journey and prepare you for your job as a docent.



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About the Fairfield Museum:



The Victorian Cottage from the front

The *Fairfield Museum and History Center* is a non-profit educational institution first founded in 1903 as the Fairfield Historical Society. As the town grew and expanded throughout the twentieth century, so did the needs of the Museum. In 2007, our new facility was built, featuring engaging exhibits, an education classroom, a research library, and a meeting hall overlooking Fairfield's historic Town Green.

The Fairfield Museum's educational programs include: walking and gallery tours, primary source workshops, living history, as well as outreach programs.

About the Building:



A back-view of the Museum building

The Museum building is designed by **Centerbrook Architects**, based in Essex, CT and built by **Tallman Builders** of Fairfield. The architecture of the building is inspired by the barns and outbuildings of the **Sturges Farm** and the **warehouses** once located on the Black Rock wharves.

Aside from our main campus, the Museum also owns and maintains the Ogden House, located at 1520 Bronson Road in Fairfield. The house is used for school tours, summer camps, and is open to the public on Sundays throughout the summer.



Museum Commons Staffing:

This summer, the Museum Commons and surrounding buildings will be open to the public! Since Covid, the **Sun Tavern**, **Victorian Cottage**, and **Victorian Barn** have largely remained closed. Starting in July, each of these buildings will be open from 10:00am-2:00pm on Saturdays.

Staff Include:

- **Site Supervisor:** The Site Supervisor is responsible for overseeing the activity on the Museum Commons and ensuring everything is running efficiently. This position will also be in charge of facilitating the craft/activity.
- **Sun Tavern Docent:** Each Saturday, one docent will be in charge of leading tours of the historic Sun Tavern. Responsibilities include providing historical context to visitors, describing how a tavern functioned, and answering any questions.
- **Victorian Cottage/Barn Docent:** In order to open both buildings to the public, a single docent will be covering both properties. If a family visits the Victorian Cottage, for example, that space should be prioritized.
- **Visitor Services Supervisor:** The Visitor Services Supervisor is in charge of handling admission, as well as opening and closing all of the properties.

A variety of fun, open-ended activities will be provided to the public with Museum admission. Examples include: **architectural and botanical**, as well as **scavenger hunts**. As a docent, you will be help facilitate these activities!

These tasks should be open-ended, allowing visitors to work at their own pace while enjoying the beautiful commons.

Full-Time Staff:

Walt Matis: Email—wmatis@fairfieldhs.org, Cell— (860)-817-4829

Charlie McMahon: Email—cmcmahon@fairfieldhs.org, Cell— (203)-581-0345



Early History & Growth:

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, explorers and colonialists from Europe embarked on transatlantic journeys to present-day North America. They came for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to religious and political freedoms.



The Southport Swamp Fight Monument

After settling the **Massachusetts Bay Colony**, early settlers traveled south along the Connecticut River in search of rich soils and greater land. The early seventeenth century marked the first intentional settlement by European colonists in Connecticut. After the founding of **Windsor**, **Hartford**, and **Wethersfield**, English settlers expanded their search for territory.

This gradual expansion led to the **Pequot War** (1637-1638), now known as the first serious conflict in New England between European colonizers and the indigenous population. The war came about due to English desires to control the region's trade routes, and as a result, tensions developed with the **Pequot**. At the time, an alliance

existed between the tribe and neighboring **Dutch** settlers. Angered by this, both the



A mural illustrating the Great Swamp Fight in Tomlinson Middle School



English and the Pequot engaged in dozens of battles across Rhode Island and Connecticut. While the Pequot did not live in Fairfield, they held sway and influence over the region. The **Unquowa** people called Fairfield home, and continue to have a presence in the region.

The war's final skirmish, the **Battle of Munnacommock Swamp** (July 13& 14, 1637), otherwise known as the Southport Swamp Fight, directly led to Fairfield's founding. After chasing the Pequot from the region, two years later, **Roger Ludlow** purchased a large plot of land from the Pequonnock people. This land stretched between the **Sasqua** (Mill) and **Pequonnock** Rivers, and extended roughly eight miles inland. Today, ongoing archaeological projects continue to bring more information to light on the battle. Archaeologist **Kevin McBride** is the regional expert on the site, and frequently speaks at the Museum regarding his findings. The Museum has a rich collection of artifacts from the archaeological site, and visitors are often interested in the process!

A central piece of that initial plot was divided into four squares with specific sections for residential, community, religious, and commercial districts. Of utmost importance, the **Town Green** was placed centrally. The green space housed grazing animals, as well as the principle house of worship and town businesses.

While life in Early Fairfield was often difficult, with early settlers living in “cellars”—square pits eight feet deep--, the community gradually expanded. By

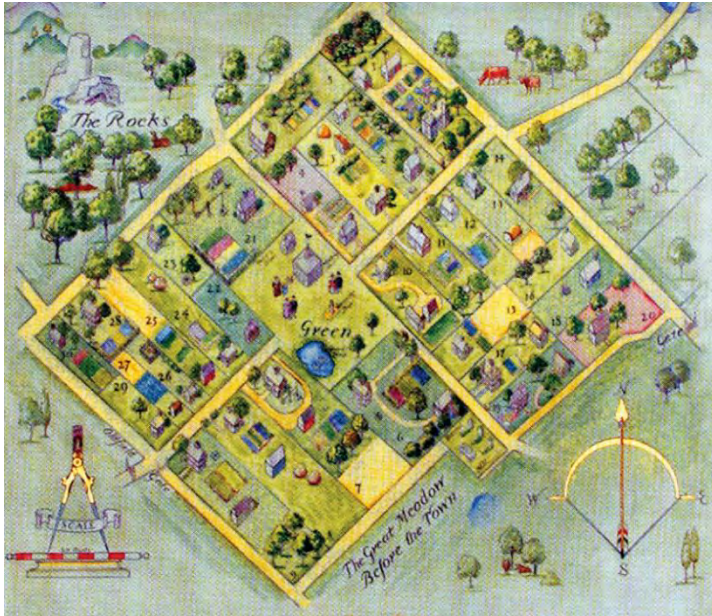


The mural of “Old Black Rock Harbor Around 1810” currently hangs in the Fairfield Museum



1670, Fairfield stretched north into present day Redding and included two thirds of **Westport** and the **Black Rock** neighborhood of Bridgeport.

The Town Green:



The idea of the colonial town green has helped to form the image of the quintessential New England community. A shared space founded on communal values, such as civic responsibility and neighborly values, Fairfield's own **Town Green** originated as the center of planning and commerce.

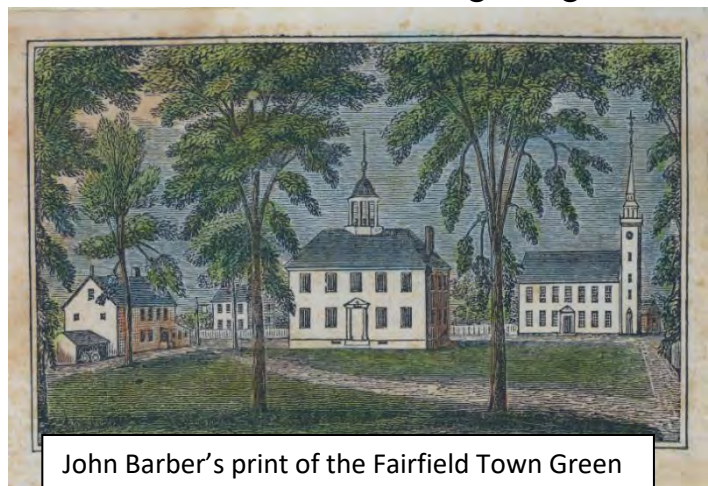
In the pre-Revolutionary era, the **Congregational Meetinghouse** that stood on the present site of First Church Congregational played host to a wide variety of functions. Aside from being a place of worship, the

Map of the Four Squares from the Fairfield Public Library

structure also hosted town meetings and social events.

Over time, as new parishes formed in and around Fairfield, the Town Green evolved. After the Revolution, a new middle class of farmers, tradespeople, and professionals redefined the space as a business center. While today the Town Green projects a sense of calmness, in the Colonial Era, much of it was used for animal grazing. Remember, the Museum Commons and the Old Town Green are separate entities.

Today, the **Museum Commons** and surrounding structures reflect Fairfield's historical integrity, while at the same time allowing for engagement and reflection. The Museum sits adjacent to the Old



John Barber's print of the Fairfield Town Green



Town Green, which lies on Old Post Road next to St. Paul's Episcopal Church.

Sun Tavern:



A view of Fairfield's Sun Tavern from the front

Historical Background:

From the time of the earliest settlers until the mid-nineteenth century, **taverns** served a wide-variety of functions. While today, images of drunken rowdiness often color the imagination, in truth, taverns often served as community hubs and gathering spaces.

As a prosperous county seat from 1666-1853, the **Sun Tavern** was one of many taverns in the area. In 1761, **Samuel Penfield** purchased the parcel of land adjacent to the Town Green. Capitalizing on his tavern's central location, Penfield welcomed travelers and villagers alike. Standing right off of King's Highway, news from other parts of New England often filtered through Penfield's.

When the British invaded the town in **July of 1779**, the original Sun Tavern was reduced to ashes and rubble. A year afterwards, Penfield rebuilt his business, running it until his death in 1811.

While tradition holds that **George Washington** stayed at the Sun Tavern on October 16, 1789, the veracity of this claim is unconfirmed. That said, there is written documentation that both **John** and **Abigail Adams** spent the night at Penfield's.

After Penfield's death, his descendants sold the property to the **Reverend Nathaniel Hewitt**. Ironically, Hewitt was a proponent of temperance and he transformed the tavern into a private residence. In 1978, the Town of Fairfield bought the property. Eventually, it was turned into the interpreted space you see today. Town Historian William Lee, and his wife Anne, worked tirelessly to oversee the renovations.



Docent Guidelines:

On **Saturdays**, one docent will be assigned to the Sun Tavern. It is the docent's job to interpret the space and offer information to visitors. The tavern is meant to be interacted with, and all objects can and should be touched and looked at! While many of the tavern features look old and antique, all of them are **reproductions**. For example, if someone is interested in colonial eating utensils, encourage them to pick up a knife and fork and see what dining was like for themselves! Upon entering, the room on the right is interpreted as the **Tap Room**. Explain to guests what visiting a tavern was like in the Colonial Era—taverns served as a commercial and news hub. In the Sun Tavern, visitors often learned new information from far away locales such as Boston and New York, owing to its location on the King's Highway.

To the left is the **Justice in Fairfield Exhibit**. Here, the Museum interprets and presents Fairfield's history as the county seat. Information to provide includes: details on Fairfield's very own witch trials, as well as the scandals of Isaac Frasier's trial for theft.

Upstairs is the **Bedroom**. Docents can explain how in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tavern visitors were not assigned their own rooms. Rather, they would most often bunk in communal spaces. On the table next to the bed sits a **bed warmer**, as well as a **bed wrench**. Explain to visitors the purposes of these two tools!

If you have any questions or concerns during your shift at the tavern, please reach out to the Site Supervisor for assistance.



Edward's Pond: Witches



Today, one can still see Edward's Pond

While many people around the country know of the **Salem Witch Trials**, very few, if any, know of Fairfield's equivalent. In 1691, Catherine Branch accused several women of bewitching her, including **Mercy Disborough** and **Elizabeth Clawson**. Wishing to establish her innocence, Mercy and Elizabeth submitted to the age-old witch test now known as “**ducking**.”

With her hands and feet bound together, Ms. Disborough was thrown into **Edward's Pond** to meet her fate. In the seventeenth century, it was believed that if a woman floated, she practiced witchcraft. Luckily, both women passed the test. After sinking, each was pulled from the water before drowning.

From left to right; a side-view of the Victorian Cottage and Barn; an interior view of the Tavern



Victorian Cottage & Barn



A view of the Victorian Cottage from the side

Historical Background:

The **Victorian Cottage** is the Museum's early childhood learning space. Currently open Wednesday and Friday, during the summer the Cottage will open on Saturday with the rest of the properties. When overseeing the cottage, docents should make sure that all toys and objects are placed in their correct spots. As many toddlers use the area, some toys may need to be disinfected after use. Different activities

will be provided for each Saturday the cottage is open.

Built in 1888 to house domestic workers and staff, both the Cottage and Barn feature unique architectural characteristics. Robert Manuel owned the tavern property, and constructed the cottage as housing for his property caretakers. Very few examples of late nineteenth century worker housing exists in Fairfield, and as a result, the cottage stands as a testament to a group of people often overlooked.

Docent Guidelines:

Each **Saturday**, one docent will be in charge of the Victorian Cottage and Barn. The Victorian Cottage is meant to be enjoyed by toddlers and their families. As it is currently set up, the space emphasizes a sense of community. There is a play table complete with Fairfield landmarks a street names. Encourage visitors to point out what they recognize!

The **tree** represents green spaces in town, as well as interconnectivity. Like a leaf on a tree, we are all a part of something bigger!

The **garden** teaches toddlers and adult visitors alike about what has been historically grown in Fairfield. Toddlers like to guess what each vegetable is.



Every Saturday, the docent staffing the **Victorian Cottage** will see activities prepared by the Museum staff. These packets will be left in a bin in the Cottage Classroom. **Activity** examples include: collage projects, as well as sun paper. Instructions, as well as prepared packets, will be provided.

When in charge of the Cottage, docents will also oversee the Victorian Barn, as well as the Commons. As a rule, if visitors want to go inside the Cottage, you should accompany them.



An interior view of the Victorian Barn space

Historical Background:

The **Victorian Barn** today houses the Museum's collection of rare agricultural instruments. Fairfield has a very rich agrarian heritage, one often overshadowed by other focuses. At the time of the American Revolution, 80% of Fairfield's citizens were farmers. A frequently difficult profession, colonial farmers pushed for greater innovations in the field. Their ingenuity led to the creation of such implements as: the **horse drawn swing plow**, the **onion seeder**, and the aptly named **potato fork**. Docents should allow visitors to peruse the Barn at their own leisure.

Docent Guidelines:

The Victorian Barn invites visitors to learn more about Fairfield's rich agricultural heritage. Most visitors pop into the barn for five to ten minutes to explore and read about the antique farm instruments. When overseeing the Barn, allow visitors to explore at their own pace. The space is perfect for self-exploration.



Docent Guidelines & Rules

Below is a list of important rules and guidelines to remember during your 2022 Summer Docent experience. If you ever have any questions, or need direct assistance regarding a customer, please contact Walt Matis or another staff member.

- **Training:** Training consists of workshops, tours of historic buildings and properties, as well as readings and discussions. At our regular monthly meetings, docents are encouraged to share any new facts, books, or readings relevant to the town's history!
- **Dress Code:** Dress comfortably, and wear shoes you will be comfortable standing in for a while. As it get hot during the summer, please bring water for your comfort!
- **Name Tags:** Volunteers are asked to always wear their nametags. Docents are given Fairfield Museum name tags which are kept in the Museum.
- **Illness:** If you are feeling unwell and cannot make it in, please try to call/email Walter Matis, Program & Volunteer Coordinator at wmatis@fairfieldhs.org
- **Emergencies:** If you should witness an accident or have an accident yourself, please notify the nearest employee in the building or on the grounds. You may be called upon to verify what took place or assist in filling out an incident report



- **Lunch:** All docents are entitled to a half an hour lunch break! Please notify the site supervisor before you leave. Docents should not take lunch at the same time.
- **Arrival:** Please plan on arriving ten minutes before opening and leaving ten minutes after closing

