350 Years of ...

STRATFORD

A town looks to its future and recalls its history.
Reporter learns he has — gasp! — a heritage

By ANDREW MARLATT
Post-Telegram staff writer

Heartless as it seems, I had never heard of, thought of nor cared about Stratford until I took a job in the Stratford bureau of the Bridgeport Post-Telegram in the summer of 1987.

I came here from the rather large state of Georgia. (Georgia always like to say their state is really big compared to Northeast states — it makes us forget about Texas who tell us Atlanta is the size of a Dallas suburban), and had never been to Connecticut. I knew only three things about it:

1) It was small.
2) It was the state where Bing Crosby started his Holiday Inn.
3) It lacked largeness.

My first few weeks in Stratford were spent trying to spell Houaston, Pequonnock and Oroonoko. (I could spell Short Beach almost immediately). I spent half my time wondering how the Long Island Sound got its name when the waves and tides hardly make any sound at all.

But as I slowly got to know the town, visiting the old buildings and walking the coves and beaches, one thought of slowly seeped into my mind: "Oh, that's nice."

It wasn't a very interesting thought. But to me, Stratford was just another town. What was interesting was that Stratford was about to celebrate its 350th birthday. This year, covering the anniversary, I discovered plenty about the town that I never knew before. For instance, I learned how to spell Tri- centennialquagmire. Or is it Tricentennialquagmire?

But the toppper was discovering that my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, Sgt. Francis Nichols, was one of Stratford's original settlers and the town's first military man.

Several thoughts immediately leaped to mind, not the least of which was that I was a Yankee. But the most interesting reaction was that I had a heritage. There was really a connection between myself and the town I covered. As anyone would in my situation, I quickly began altering my recollections of Stratford.

"Didn't I feel something eerie when I first came to town?" I lied to myself. "Didn't I feel like I had known Stratford all my life when I first drove through?"

After my discovery, I started making calls, going to the library, visiting local cemeteries, and generally dressing up. On my old map, I found Sgt. Francis and his now-Caleb owned two strips of land on what is now Elm Street between Stratford Avenue and Wells Place. My first thought was: "I want that land back! It's worth a fortune!"

But I drove by the property and found someone already owned it. (I'm still considering legal action.)

I further discovered Sgt. Francis' grandson founded Trumbull — thus called Unity (the town, not the grandson) — and owned large called Nichols Farm. That area of Trumbull is still called Nichols and Nichols Avenue and Nichols Elementary School were named for him. I found the graves of several grandfathers and grandmothers in Trumbull, and even photographed them without really knowing why. But sadly, I never found Sgt. Francis buried somewhere in Stratford in 1861.

Town historian Lewis Knapp told me that Sgt. Francis' grave in the original burying ground by Shore Road was never found. However, during sewer work several years ago in the area, the skeleton of a large man was unearthed, Knapp said.

"May be that was him." Knapp offered.

Well, the thought of my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather being dug up to make way for a sewer appeal to me, so I decided that couldn't have been him.

But I figured that if I wandered around town long enough, what with me being a grandson and all...

Sgt. Francis would call out to me, beckoning me to his final resting place to pay homage and hopefully giving me the deed to his land. I did some wandering in the South End of town and was bestowed a few titles but I'm sure my ancestor would call me by saying, "Hey buddy, got some nice stereo speakers, huh?... Good stuff. I'll cut you a deal."

I've given up hope of finding Sgt. Francis, but in a way, I found me. And beside, I cut out a few more things about my ancestors that made me for that loss:

One great-grandmother married a grandson, who didn't marry another man, who was dead, and another man who quickly died and another who didn't make it and another, dead, and another, dead and another before she finally departed. Seven husbands in 40 years. This story of my bloodline makes me feel nervous every time she hears it, but she has been good to me lately.


Sir Robert Nichols, Sgt. Francis' brother and my great-great-grandfather, was killed when, according to his gravestone, a cannonball pierced his body. Now my brother had his last test plane. I wonder if he got that plane from Sir Robert? Pierced?

Publisher
Dudley B. Thomas

Managing editor
Constance Davis

Contributing editors
Dana Jonk Silver
Marjorie McPherson
Linda Davis Marshall
Anita Lucidallino

Contributing reporters
Annmarie Smith
Joyce McDonald
Lolita Haldorson
Bill McDonald

Cover photographs
by Wayne Rensberger

Despite the rain, a crowd gathers at a recent softball game at Short Beach. Effort is incredibly in-town. See story on Page 6.
Celebrate

It’s the 350th Birthday of Stratford and Bradlees joins in the celebration with a

$350 SHOPPING SPREE

We’re proud to be a part of your community and we want to be a part of your 350th Birthday Celebration, too!

To celebrate Stratford Day, June 24, we’re offering one lucky shopper the chance to win a $350 Shopping Spree!

No purchase necessary. Register in store at Bradlees in Stratford now through Saturday, June 24, 1989. Complete contest details in store.
Mystery, romance in a stroll

By LOLITA C. BALDOR
Post-Telegram staff writer

STRATFORD — Perched atop the Christ Episcopal Church on Main Street are Stratford’s own scars from the French and Indian War.

The golden rooster weathervane, nearly six feet high, was mounted on the church steeple in 1743.

While Colonel Penney’s Highland Battalion camped during the winter of 1787-88, the soldiers used the rooster for target practice.

Its tail still bears the marks.

The church is the first stop in one of Stratford’s two historical walking tours that wind through the Academy Hill and shoreline areas of town.

Created last year, after more than 18 months of research, the tours offer a stroll through the mystery, romance and adventure of Stratford’s 350 years of rich history.

Once the Indian village of Cupbang, the town was founded in 1639 and permanently named after William Shakespeare’s hometown in England.

See ADVENTURES on 9

The Judson House is one of many historical sites and points of interest outlined in “A Walk Through Time.”

Happy 350th

Mudrick’s

SINCE 1949

TELEVISION and APPLIANCE
1480 BARNUM AVENUE
STRATFORD • 375-5220
MONDAY-FRIDAY 9-9 • SATURDAY 9-6
“The Store Where You Can Buy With Confidence.”

Colonial of Hickory Hill

The Ultimate Experience in Fine Catering
For those with discriminating taste.

Weddings Banquets

Now Booking 1990 Guaranteed Prices

CUTSPRING RD., STRATFORD
375-2053

• CHEF HOST
BRUCE MILLER
CIA Grad 1976
"Mac's Harbor," traditional landing place of Stratford's first settlers, above, and the town's oldest postal route sign, below, at Elm Street and East Broadway, are among the many sites of historical interest in town. Many are featured in walking tours, which were the brainchild of Barbara Streisand, a member of the town's Tourism Committee.

Adventurous?
Take a walk

Continued from 4

The tours are outlined in a booklet, "A Walk through Time," available in Town Hall, 5720 Main Street, the Stratford Historical Society in the Judson House, 70 Academy Hill; and at the Hill and Harbor Convention and Visitors District office, 60 Broadway Street.

The Academy Hill Walk takes about 90 minutes and includes 59 stops.

The booklet recounts stories about Stratford's mysterious tunnels, that longtime residents remember playing in years ago.

The tunnels may have been part of the underground railroad during the Civil War, or as an escape route from Indians.

The second tour, the show wi, takes about 30 minutes and points of interest it mentions include the banks of the Housatonic River and Mill River. To see the banks of the Mill River, a walk on Pens Park Road near George Washington is reported to have crossed the river by ferry on several different times.

"CONGRATS
STRATFORD"

350th BIRTHDAY
from
Matt Corvo and Staff
at
Burgundy
Chevrolet

1425 Barnum Ave., Stfd.
375-3371
Softball is serious business

By JEFFREY McMENEMY
Post-Telegram staff writer

STRATFORD — This town loves softball.

"It's more than just a game or a way of getting exercise for the people in town who play it."

"It's amazing how popular softball is in Stratford," Recreation director Patricia Patansky said recently.

There are a lot of people who are extremely serious about it. It becomes their life in the summer. I've seen people reschedule their weddings—both men and women—so they can play softball.

There are 46 different softball teams in Stratford with over 600 people participating in the various leagues that play on 17 different fields, Patansky said.

There's a girls' fast-pitch league, a women's slow-pitch league, a men's slow-pitch league, and a coed league, Patansky said.

She attributes the popularity of the sport to the fact that many girls grew up playing the game and that many men played baseball when they were kids and have switched to softball now that they're older.

The leagues start playing games in mid-April, and some of them keep playing until October, according to Patansky.

The champions of the various leagues invariably end up going to regional and state competitions in July and August, where they have performed well in past years, according to Patansky.

But the most successful and best known team in Stratford is the Hi Ho Brakettes, the defending world champion women's fast-pitch softball team.

The Brakettes are in their 45th year of operation, in the top 11 years, they have been to the national championships 27 times and have won those contests all but nine times, according to Bob Baird, the chairman of the Atlantic Coast Women's Softball Association.

The team has also won three world championships, according to Baird, who said they captured the title in 1974 in Stratford, 1975 in San Salvador, and in 1986 in Auckland, New Zealand.

The team was sponsored up until 1985 by Raybestos-Manhattan Inc., but when that company dropped them, the Brakettes were picked up by D'Addario Industries in Bridgeport.

However, the team still plays in Stratford at the Fenston-Lycoming field off Main Street, Baird said.

He said during the mid-1970s, the team used to draw crowds of up to 1,000 people, and although the audiences have dropped off since, the Brakettes can still put 500 to 600 people in the stands.
These pioneers had their eyes on the sky

STRATFORD — When explosions echoed across Long Island on Aug. 9, 1911, residents thought they were hearing gunshots from the upcoming Army National Guard war games that began three days earlier.

Instead, Army engineers were blasting rocks on Whipsnade's daily farm to make a runway for the first airplane to be used under battle conditions. The highlight of the war games came when the squadron of three planes performed extraordinary feats for their time, flying down a 30-degree slope between opposing armies. Two of the planes eventually crashed, but their flights were deemed a success.

Silk's arrives in Stratford from Long Island in 1929.

The aerial viaduct was welcomed by 10,000 spectators on Aug. 16, according to some accounts. Stratford residents had watched the first flights of the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk, N.C. In 1903, Whipsnade supposedly made a first flight at Long Island but in 1929, he didn't. Perhaps ordered not to show again, according to the inscription on the frame, the plane was not displayed.

The first flight, including Sunday School kids, was among the pioneers of the sky, but Stratford's greatest aviation moment probably began in early 1930. A new hangar was built.

In 1930, taking many of his Russian employees with him, the man who founded Stratford, Charles Lindbergh, hired his own plane and radiated around the country.

Charles Lindbergh, left, and Igor Ivanovich Sikorsky — pioneers in the development of manned flight.

Dedicated to the Memory of

James "Big Mike" Louloudes

Founder

1st Fast Food Restaurant

Stratford Center

1911

Liedle's

Caterers

337 Kenyon Street, Stratford

Paul Louloudes, mgr.

GOOD CAMPING!

STAYS WITH GOOD EQUIPMENT!

Check Your List — We Carry Many Name-Of-Your-Locker & Trunk — 26.00 & Up

Send today for our GIFT CATALOGUE

AND MANY OTHER ITEMS

"The Complete Camp Store"

1400 Business Ave. - Other Locations 570-3331 or 872-5519

ARMY & NAVY

BARBER

CAMPING

CLOTHING

COMMERCIAL

DENTAL

GAMES

HAT

INSTRUMENTS

JEWELRY

LABORATORY

PARKING

POST OFFICE

RETAIL

SALES

SPORTS

STATIONERY

ADDITIONAL ITEMS
YOUR OPINION

QUESTION:
What makes Stratford special?

WHERE ASKED:
Main Street, Stratford

Edna O'Donnell
Stratford
housewife

"It's a small town, and everyone's friendly. It's a pleasant place with nice shopping and nice schools. It's a safe area, too."

Dr. S. William Impellitteri
Stratford
oral surgeon

"It's crime free, practically. You feel safe walking the streets at night. It's nowhere near as bad as some neighboring cities."

Michelle Lins
Stratford
secretary

"The beaches. You can just let the kids go, and they can run free. It's nice for adults, too, because we can swim and get a suntan."

Lisa Sherlock
Stratford
mother

"There are a lot of family activities. There are a lot of beautiful parks and many family-oriented activities like Parents Place at Johnson Academy and Sterling House Playground."

Debbie Evans
Stratford
real estate agent

"The educational system. My husband and I both graduated from the school system, and now we have five children in it. There are some negatives, but I think most of the people in the school system do their darndest to make it work."

Timothy Crowley
Stratford
night supervisor

"It's something like a country atmosphere when you come into Stratford. You go into one section and find all the stores. Go into North Stratford, and it's a beautiful country setting."

Michael Kupershmidt
Stratford
school principal

"It has a lot for the youth. The athletic programs at Sterling House is a fine one, for example."

Some Things Improve With Age
Town home for the inventive

Stratford has had its share of famous inventors and inventions—later Roscoy's helicopter, Alfred Ely Beach's submarine and Tom Berquist's Booger.

A former product development expert for General Electric Co. and Texas Instruments, Berquist invented Booger three years ago while sitting around the dinner table discussing why children like sugar things. No came up with Booger, a fruit-flavored, sugar-enriched candy bar that has been on the market since last fall and is "one of the better kids' snacks on the market," according to Berquist.

Booger is not the only successful candy bar from Berquist, 42, who said he helped develop the General Electric smoke alarm and a line of Texas Instruments watches. He is also the inventor of Sand Hill Gum, bubble gum that looks and feels like sand.

Berquist has garnered national attention for Berquist, who calls himself more of a marketing man than an inventor. But perhaps no Stratford invention is more famous—and its designer more obscure—than the subway.

In 1866, Alfred Ely Beach designed and built the first subway in New York City. The tunneling machine designed by Beach, who moved to town in 1830, was used to dig under the Hudson River and the Thames River in England.

"He's really my favorite," said Town Historian Lewis Knapp. "He did this great thing and nobody seems to know about him."

MARSILLIO'S
LOWER PRICES — BETTER SERVICE —
Locally Owned & Operated For Over 38 Years.

DEHUMIDIFIER SALE
Westinghouse
- 2 Speed Fan
- Auto Shut Off
- Auto Defrost
Pre-Season
25 Pl. $199.95
30 Pl. $219.95

GAS GRILLS
- DUCANE
- TEMCO
- CHARBROIL
TWIN BURNER w/TANK & 2 SHELVES
We Stock Natural
GAS GRILLS
From
$129.95

Friedrich
PRE-SEASON
Sale
LAST WEEK AT PRE-SEASON PRICES

Buy America's BEST room air conditioner NOW!
- high efficiency, low noise output
- Energy-saving, less than two cents per hour
- Condenser is Convection (water cooled)
- Self-cleaning filter, permanent air filters
- Highly efficient copper MOTOR-COIL made in Japan by Friedrich
- Arrange for easy installation
- Performance quality, dependability and trouble-free operation

Stratford
 Median home price: $180,000
 Median income: $25,000
 Homes: 5,000
 Annual rainfall: 38.15 inches
 Unemployment rate: 5.1%
FAST FORWARD

Learning from the past, looking to the future

From its 300th year in 1989 to its 350th year in 1999, Stratford saw few dramatic changes. Industrial firms are still the top employers. The town manager/council form of government remains intact. Even many of the schools which stood then still stand now.

But what of Stratford in the next 50 years? What will it mean to be a Stratfordite in the year 2039 on the town's 400th anniversary?

Post-Telegram reporters Jeffrey McMenemy and Andrew Moratti asked politicians, planners, police, educators and others about what the next five decades will bring.

Ronald Owens
Town manager

"Ever since I've been in Stratford, (he arrived five years ago), I've felt Stratford was at a cross-roads. And our fate is really tied to Bridgeport."

Within the next decade, Owens believes Bridgeport will begin a renaissance which Stratford can either follow or watch. The Town's response will dictate whether Stratford becomes a successful community of professionals and high-tech industries or a town in decay.

"It's classic. As cities begin to rebuild, it pushes the depressed areas out. I see Stratford as having two alternatives. We can provide housing for the professional, technical and high-skill people moving into the Bridgeport area...or if we go the other way, we'll provide a place to live for the people with less income. We'd be faced with the exact same problems as Bridgeport has now."

If local government and residents put money back into the community—renovating schools, homes and the like—Stratford will be ready for the change. If not, the town's next anniversary may be a bleak one.

"I don't think Stratford can remain the same in the next 50 years. You can't just put your foot down and say 'This is the way I want it to be.'"

Richard Buturla
Town Council chairman

"Stratford in 50 years will still be a town of people of all types and all income levels. I think we'll keep that balance that we have right now between industrial, commercial and residential."

Contrary to Owens, Buturla believes Stratford will remain the same "solid middle-class town." As long as education is given enough support to feed local industries such as Sikorsky and Textron-Lycoming, the mix of businesses and homes will hold. Buturla, too, is concerned about sprawl from Bridgeport, but says the main struggles will be with the environment and overdevelopment.

"We have to preserve the single-family character of our neighborhoods. We can't allow developers to maximize profits by allowing too many multi-family homes. We're really going to be able to control our destiny."

Leonard Petraccelli
Board of Education chairman

"We'll have to really watch out for funding. The way taxes and the economy are going, people are going to be less likely to want to pay for education."

Stratford's ever-increasing senior citizens population could threaten school funding to pay for the Information Age, Petraccelli says. From 1980 to 1989, the town's over-65 population has grown from 15 to 21 percent of the total population, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates. The number of schoolchildren aged five to 19, however, has dropped 6 percent. If the trend continues, the elderly without children and on fixed incomes either won't want or won't be able to pay for education, Petraccelli said.

"It's not going to be like the old days when a pencil and blackboard were sufficient. Costs are going to go up."

Rev. Adam Bakeman and company travel from Westerfield to found Stratford, then called Cuppaug or Pequonnock.
Robert Sammis
Member of harbor commission

"The waterfront represents a grand and abundant resource for Stratford. Our challenge as regulators and activists is to preserve, protect, and enhance these resources so that those who view the marshes and the sound 50 years hence will say, 'Well done.'"

Sammis said the town will have to make a commitment in terms of time, talent, and dollars to achieve this end or risk causing "irreversible damage" to the waterfront.

The biggest threats to the waterfront are over-development and pollution of water resources not only locally but also up river in neighboring towns, according to Sammis.

"We have to begin to think about water quality beyond our own borders. What success Bridgeport has in cleaning up its harbor greatly affects Stratford," Sammis said.

William Milne
Deputy police chief

"I think there'll be more drugs coming into town unless government uses all resources to stop it. With the increase in drugs comes an increase in homicides, burglaries and larcenies."

Milne said the 38-year veteran of the Stratford Police Department said the increases in drug use and sales will likely be fueled by dealers in Bridgeport spreading out into Stratford.

"I believe the town will continue its shift away from manufacturing concerns toward more high-tech industries."
Riding into the past

Trolley car makes its way through the Academy Hill area of Stratford during a tour that was part of the 350th anniversary celebration.

Mark your calendar with these events

June 12: Chapel Street School 350th Day.
June 18: Sterling House Arts and Crafts Show.
June 24: Stratford Day, Main Street.

July 2: Stratford salutes the 4th of July, Short Beach.
July 5: 60th anniversary of Sikorsky Memorial Airport.
July 16: Historical Crafts Fair, Academy Hill.

More trolley tours are planned for June 10-11. For details, call The 350th Store at 378-1839.

Aug. 3-7: Sister Cities Week.
Aug. 11: Airshow reception, Stratford Ramada.
Sept. 17: Reception for 350th History Book, Town Hall.
Oct. 7: 350th Intra-Community Marathon Run.
Oct. 7: Founders Day Parade.
Oct. 8: Curtis and Hawley Family Reunion.
Oct. 13-14: Town and Country Fair, Stratford Methodist Church.
Oct. 21: Igor Sikorsky's 100th Birthday.
Nov. 5: Guided tours of burying ground, First Congregational Church.
Nov. 12: 350th Holiday Fair, Stratford Armory.
Nov. 19: Thanksgiving Thanksgiving Thanks.
Dec. 2: 350th Dinner Dance.
Dec. 18: The annual Christmas Parade, Town Hall Green.
This mural on the wall of the Council Chambers of Town Hall depicts the first settlers of Stratford coming ashore at Mac's Harbor. Town historian Lewis Knapp, however, believes the first settlers actually came by land, not boat.

Mural: true to life or legend?

In the Council Chambers of Town Hall, a huge mural depicts the first settlers of Stratford coming ashore at Mac's Harbor in 1639.

The exhausted settlers are on the beach, giving thanks for their safe arrival.

While no one claims the painting is an exact recreation of the original founding, chances are it may not even be close.

Legend has it that the first settlers of Stratford — 17 to 25 families — came here by boat. But, according to town historian Lewis Knapp, chances are that the settlers — more like 70 to 100 of them — came by land from Wethersfield in the spring of 1639.

At the time, two British colonies existed in the state — the New Haven Colony and the Connecticut Colony, comprising Hartford, Wethersfield and Windsor. In the spring of 1639, the governor and General Court of the Connecticut Colony began discussing a possible new settlement at the mouth of what is now called the Housatonic River.

The farmers in Wethersfield, who emigrated to America and working on poor land, heard rumors of the new settlement and left early, Knapp believes.

"It seems as though they didn't tell anybody, they just left," said Knapp, who believes the settlers came by land because they lacked enough boats to carry people, supplies and livestock.

In the fall of that year, colony officials sent Deputy Gov. Roger Ludlowe to start a settlement at Stratford, then called Cupisnagham Plantation. But when he arrived, he found some of the Connecticut Colony's people already had settled there, Knapp said.

Knapp sent down a sergeant to drill the colonists and give them a loyalty oath to the Connecticut Colony, securing the Stratford area for their own.
Those sounds and feelings that are hard to explain

By JEFFREY McHENRY
Post-Telegram staff writer

STRATFORD — There have long been stories about the Civil War Room at the Boothby Homestead.

While the room was opened to the public in May of 1967, numerous people have complained about an eerie, uncomfortable feeling soon after they walk in the door.

Those experiences have continued, according to Boothby Park Commissioner Renata Burton, who recently said that close to 100 people of all ages have complained about the room and its feelings of sadness and oppression it brings.

The experiences have ranged from a first-grade pupil’s complaint about feeling chills in the room to a 90-degree day to an elderly woman’s fainting when she went into the room, Burton said. Many others have walked into the room and then walked right back out, saying they had to get out into the hall.

The experiences have become so commonplace that park officials keep a chair by the door in case anyone feels faint.

But in April, the Civil War Room was locked and left to the town by the descendants of Boothby brothers, David and Norman, who left the Civil War Room to outsiders another morning, according to Helen Chaguras, another park commissioner.

On separate occasions in April, another commissioner and a staff member at the facility, who were alone in the house at the time, heard a woman’s voice coming from outside Mrs. Boothby’s bedroom, according to Chaguras.

The staff member said she was sitting in the kitchen downstairs when she “very distinctly” heard a woman’s voice coming from upstairs.

She went to the staircase and called out hello, but nobody answered. As she started to go up the stairs, the voice disappeared.

A week later, a commissioner was sitting alone and heard a woman’s voice, according to the staff member.

“She was very upset by what had happened, and it convinced me that I had actually heard something and wasn’t just imagining things,” the staff member said.

But as to the current situation at the Boothby Homestead, there are still many unanswered questions.

“I haven’t experienced anything myself, but I know there’s a history of people who’ve felt things or heard things and I believe they’re talking to the truth,” Burton said. “But I don’t know how to explain it.”
Rumor has it: from old age to young love

In 1950, Albert Langel moved to Stratford and bought his first duck decoy carvings. Langel attended the school of duck decoy carving in town. Because real Stratford ducks keep their limits high to keep them out of raising ducks and river currents, Stratford decoys are known for their high breasts. They are also known for their high prices.

When Langel died in 1987, his cars were very old, but they sold for $2,000 to $2,500 each. But that's peanuts compared to the work of Charles "Shore" Wheeler, the last of three famous Stratford carvers who followed the work of Ben Holmes. Wheeler, who died about 30 years ago, is considered one of the best ever in his field, and some of his decoys fetch $10,000.

Adams Wheeler is one of the first settlers in Stratford, also believed to be New England's first centenarian. He died in 1880 at the age of 107. The first ferry to run the river between Milford and Stratford, Wheeler is the namesake of the 1895 bridge spanning the Housatonic River between the two communities.

Popular belief has it that Stratford is named for Stratford-Upon-Avon in England. After all, the town built the American Shakespeare Theatre, now called the American Festival Theatre, after the home of Britain's most famous playwright.

But Town Historian Lewis Knapp said England has four towns named Stratford, including two in the area believed to be the original home to other Connecticut colonists. "There could be any one of those," he said.

Legend has it the infamous pirate Capt. Kidd buried treasure along the Connecticut coast. And Stratford has staked a claim to the story.

Some of Kidd's loot was supposedly found in the Thomas Wells House on Elm Street, according to Dr. Watt, designer of the hometown Stratford trike game. Some believe more treasure is buried somewhere around the base of Long Beach.

Connolly was more than just a shady tale to Stratford. In 1773, Stratford's Ann Connolly was the daughter of a local blacksmith, and on her feet by the son of Reverend Dr. Watt. The two unwrapped a package that contained a diamond-studded gold eagle.
An original of the Magna Carta was part of the “Roads to Liberty: Magna Carta to the Constitution” exhibit that traveled to 25 states to commemorate the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. Stratford resident Fred Biesold was founder of the exhibit.

‘Roads to Liberty’ tour started off from Stratford

In 1987, 800 years after Stratford native William Samuel Johnson signed the U.S. Constitution, another Stratford resident decided Johnson’s signature and the famous document should be America.

Resident Paul Biesold organized the “Roads to Liberty” traveling exhibit, a specially equipped tractor-trailer that took original drafts of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Magna Carta on a nationwide, 10,000-mile journey.

After the exhibit was set up in Stratford, the traveling show officially began with a ribbon-cutting ceremony in the White House Rose Garden on March 11, 1987. It ended Sept. 29, 1987, in Philadelphia.

Approximately 300,000 Americans from St. Paul, Minn., to Macon, Ga., passed through the exhibit before the truck returned to Stratford in October of 1987 to be taken apart.

Among the articles in the traveling show was an original 1295 draft of the Constitution belonging to Pierre Butler, a delegate to the Constituent Convention. He is one of four remaining copies of the Magna Carta, a document signed by King John of England in 1215 that expresses many of the ideas on government reflected in the Constitution.

The collection also included original copies of the Declaration of Independence; the Emancipation Proclamation, which was issued by Abraham Lincoln in 1863; and each state along the tour, an individual display of historical state documents.

Biesold, long active in politics, served as a Stratford commissioner, an official state librarian, and as a deputy chairman of the Republican National Committee.

He is now the principal architect of the principally Stratford Connecticut World Trade Association.

Its son, Kevin, developed several programs that included having a trailer in 75 cities. The younger Biesold believes the tour is a “wonderful, a lifetime,” experience.

"It’s not just a tour, it’s a voyage, a journey to the past," Kevin Biesold said.
Theater struggles for a comeback

By LOLITA C. BALDOZ
Post-Telegram staff writer

STRATFORD — The curtain of the American Festival Theatre will rise again this summer, and with it the hopes that it will spark an economic re-birth in town.

The theater, which has not hosted a full summer season since 1983, is the subject of a unique cooperative venture between the state, the town and a private board of trustees.

Once the site of lavish, star-studded Shakespearean productions, the theater is now part of a Herculean struggle to revive its glory days.

State officials, from Gov. William O'Neill on down, to local political and business leaders, have set their sights on revitalizing the theater as a major tourism draw in the state and even New England.

A prosperous theater, they reason, will improve not only the economic health of the town, but also the region and the state.

The non-profit board of directors that ran the theater since its inception in 1985 declared bankruptcy and finally sold the property to the state in 1992. Now a state panel is reviewing building and grounds has been the subject of a series of public meetings.

The American Festival Theatre, undergoing a facelift.

Last year, a new board of trustees took the helm and began the slow process of renovating and revitalizing the theater. The prestigious New York City architectural firm of James Stewart Polshek has been hired to redesign parts of the building and create a master plan for its use.

Polshek is best known for his restoration of the renowned Carnegie Hall in New York.

Conservators and planning guidelines have frustrated the board members who, as top corporate executives, are unused to the state-like pace of government projects.

Top state officials, including Anthony T. Williams, secretary of the state Office of Policy and Management, have been forced to mediate between the board and state department heads who are responsible for the bidding and repairs.

"If we can get the theater operating," said Stratford Town Manager Ronald Owens, "I think by going through this process, it will be a strong entity. If it is going to fail, it will fail early on, the battles are very frustrating, but it will make for a successful theater."

Both Owens and Neil Sherman, vice president of the Bridgeport Business Council, agree that a thriving theater will be a boon to the region, pumping more than $1 million into the economy.

"As in any new venture, the first couple of steps are going to be fraught with problems," said Sherman. "But, I think we're going to iron out the difficulties."

Board members have been reluctant to discuss specific plans for a summer season, but last month state officials solved problems that were stalling production efforts.

Now, officials say, they are finalizing plans for what is expected to be a short performance season designed to coincide with the town's 350th birthday.

That season, officials hope, will mark the beginning of a new golden era for the Bard.

---

ENTREPRISE OLD$ 877-0311
915 Boston Post Rd., Milford, CT Exit 39A, off I-95
Here's a list of Oldsmobile dealers who will beat our price.
(We believe.)

Get Up To $1500 Cash Rebates Or Interest Rates As Low As 2.9%
Facts and fables
Town's history fills pages of new book

By ANDREW MARLATT
Post-Telegram staff writer

STRATFORD — Looking back on 350 years, Lewis Knapp has a lot of favorites.

Near the top of the list is John Birdseye, who in 1649 fled to Stratford after kissing his wife. It was Colonial law, not the kissing, which caused the man to run.

“He lived in Milford, but kissing your wife in public in Milford was against the law,” said Knapp, Stratford’s town historian. “So he jumped in the (Housatonic) river and swam across to Stratford. Kissing wasn’t against the law here.”

Birdseye’s story, along with hundreds of other facts and fables, is included in Knapp’s new Stratford history book, “In Pursuit of Paradise,” which should be out by August.

With 976 pages and 300 illustrations and pictures, the book has been Knapp’s obsession the past year and a half. He has spent more than 3,000 hours compiling stories, checking facts and, as all good historians do, challenging legends and myths.

One such legend involves Goody Bassett, who was hanged for witchcraft in Stratford in 1653. While few today would argue Bassett was a real witch, Knapp said he believes Bassett and her husband were just have been “troublemakers” passing through town who got into an argument with local authorities.

Although there is some question concerning who the Bassett were, Knapp said a man and woman named Bassett were thrown out of New Haven for challenging authority there and were probably going through Stratford on their way to Stamford when their personalities again clashed with local laws.

“By that time, the only decent place to live was to be on somebody and you took care of them,” Knapp said.

Knapp’s book is finished with the help of 12 writers all working for free — the third history of Stratford. The other two are “History of Stratford” by William Howard Volcoxon and “The History of Stratford and Bridgeport” by Samuel De Witt.

While some of the new history retraces steps taken by the previous two authors, much of it is new, including sections on oystering, aircraft and dark carving.

Bridgeport resident John Kochis, who grew up watching oyster boats from his family’s cottage on Long Beach, wrote a chapter on the town’s once enormous oystering industry.

The biggest business in the area at the turn of the century, oystering employed thousands of local workers. But while most consider an oyster good eating, in Stratford, the only good oyster was a dead oyster — or at least an invisible one.

That’s because Stratford’s main contribution to the industry was the seed oyster: These small, invisible oysters, taken from the Housatonic and on the shore, were sold to harvesters in several other states and used as seeds to grow larger, edible oysters.

Empty oyster shells, which Kochis said line some sections of the Housatonic up to 30 feet deep, also were a money source. Workers called “shellersmen” dug up the shells and sold them to harvesters. The shells were used as a bed for new oyster colonies. Kochis said.

From oystering to aircraft, sea captains to shipbuilding and religion to the American Revolution, Knapp’s history book shows a Stratford that mirrors the history of the nation.

“As Stratford history goes, so goes the history of the country, is what I figure,” Knapp said.

“In Pursuit of Paradise” immortalizes Stratford residents who have shared in the best parts of American history: post rider Ebenezer Hudgins, who took the news of lightning and thunder to New York City; unknown citizen who hand-delivered food and money to 15 Stratford men fighting at Vicksburg; sea captains John Sterling and Polaski, Benjamin, two of half a dozen locals who made records across the Pacific to China along the trade routes; Igor Sikorsky, who invented the helicopter; William Samuel Johnson, signer of the U.S. Constitution.

The book also tells of a few who mirrored the seamy side of U.S. history: sea captain John Kelly, who decided he didn’t want to declare Stratford, so he sailed up the Housatonic...

Congratulations Stratford...
You’ve progressed for 350 years. All of us who produce Ashcroft products wish you continued success and a earnest desire that you... Continue the Spirit
History

Continued from 1A

satic and hid the barrels, then
was caught and sent to jail, and the
ship was sold, members of the
Beardley family, who were in
volved in counterfeiting in the
1790s, the son of Stratford's foun
der, the Rev. Adam Blaksen, who
was run out of town for fornication.

"I'm not happy with it," said
Knapp of his first and probably last
book. "I'm never happy with what I
complete. I can always do better."

Of the 4,000 books to be printed, 1,000
books have been sold before
publication at $25 a copy. The price
will go up to $30 a copy after the book
comes out, and Knapp said 2,000
have been to break even.

All proceeds from "In Pursuit of
Paradise" will go to the Stratford
Historical Society.

But Lewis Knapp's work will not be the only 350th anniversary book to come out this year. His
wife, Vivienne, has just published a
book called "Furnival's Know
...Treasures from Yesterday's
Kitchens." The book of 120 recipes
-- all at least 60 years old -- sells for $5, with the money going to the his
historical society.

"It needs the mistake of letting

Knapp said, "and the next thing
you know, she's competing with
me."
We get our power from Stratford.

Congratulations, Stratford, on 350 years of progress and prosperity. You've helped fuel Connecticut's growth.

And congratulations to the people of Stratford. You've helped us build the best gas turbine engines in the world.