

“A Vanished Port: Middletown and the Slave Economy of the Caribbean, 1650-1824”

Illustrated talk by Connecticut River historian Erik Hesselberg

Middletown lies at a great bend in the Connecticut River, 26 miles from its flow into Long Island Sound. The town was once a bustling seaport, ranking with Newburyport and Salem, Massachusetts. By 1750, Middletown was the largest and richest colony in Connecticut, with a dozen wharves pushing out into the wide river, from which sailed full-rigged ships and schooners, West Indies-bound. Nearby stood the big square mansions of merchants and sea captains, whose trading fortunes put the riverport on the map.

“A Vanished Port” will focus on Middletown’s connection to the slave-based sugar economy of the Caribbean islands, and the wealth it produced, as evidenced by the sumptuous dwellings that once lined the waterfront, and the fine interior furnishings that survived. Physical evidence of Middletown’s maritime past was largely erased during the controversial 1960’s Urban Renewal Program with buildings knocked down and carted away. However, a collection of shipping records housed at the Middlesex County Historical Society document the extensive trade with the Caribbean Islands, where Connecticut Valley agricultural products were exchanged for the proverbial sugar, molasses, and rum. These records and other clues help us identify the interlocking oligarchy of merchants who controlled the commerce in those years – men like Richard Alsop, whose trading fortunes rivalled the Crowninshield clan of Salem, Mass. Of special interest is the mariner William Van Deursen, of New York Dutch ancestry, who moved to Middletown during the American Revolution and grew rich as a privateer and later trafficked in slaves. Captain Stephen Clay’s mansion near the current location of the YMCA had a shanty to the side where slaves were housed before being sold at auction.

Van Deursen and Clay’s path to profit was not at all new and had its roots in the Caribbean ventures of men like Robert Rich, 2nd Earl of Warwick, a staunch Puritan who made his money in piracy and slaving. Lord Rich was a principal backer of the Plymouth Pilgrims as well as John Winthrop’s Massachusetts Bay Colony, which imported slaves as early as 1638.