

19. CHATHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY -MARGARET KEISLER MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP

ESSAY: Chatham: My Town by a River. The history of our town is made up of individual, unique stories. Please share your own distinctive story about growing up in Chatham. Your story may become part of the Chatham Historical Society anecdotal history archive.

I have a love for history and tradition. Something that started very young for me, always being interested in the past and facts about each place I visited. Going to Jockey Hollow for Girl Scouts and driving on the streets George Washington and his troops walked on or going to the library and knowing on that piece of property there used to be a hotel, The Fairview House. Knowing what life used to be like just seemed to interest me.

A tradition that always excited me was the parade down Main Street on the 4th of July. Getting up early hearing the cannon go off at Memorial Park announcing the start of the day. Grabbing my pre-planned red, white, and blue outfit and either a swim shirt or Girl Scout sash depending on who I was walking with during the parade. I always enjoyed walking along Main Street, waving and smiling at everyone, seeing the homestretch by CVS and knowing there were hotdogs and root beer waiting for me.

Sadly, this past year because of COVID that didn't happen. So many people missed out on making the memories that came with walking in the parade. I was so upset, knowing this tradition and historic event wasn't happening. I knew with COVID it wasn't a possibility, but still it was disappointing.

At the same time I was working on my Gold Award which focused on the negative effects of plastic bags. I chose to focus on that because of the Plastic Bag Ordinance which was passed in Chatham recently. I needed a way to raise money for my project to buy reusable bags for the community, but bake sales didn't seem possible during a pandemic. Instead I decided to create a scavenger hunt down the parade route on Main Street that stopped at historic locations on the way. I was so excited to do this because of my love of history and research especially in my own town. I spent hours looking up information on my computer as well as looking through books like *My Town By A River* and *Chatham: At the Crossing of the Fishawack*. One evening I had a great conversation with Liz Holler and she told me about so many different places in Chatham. Ms. Holler spoke of the car garage (which then became a newspaper distributor) near the train tracks that was boarded up when they built the train overpass, so the owner sued and won. She remembered the fire at the Chatham Hotel that happened when the entire Fire Department was at a holiday party. I was so intrigued. What started as a 30 minute phone conversation turned into more than an hour. After our phone call, I tried to write down

everything I could remember and then told my family and grandma all the facts I heard. It was so interesting.

All this information I compiled into my scavenger hunt along with summaries of each location as well as questions. The scavenger hunt started at Shepard Kollock park, the location of the bread ovens for George's Washington troops that were used in a hoax against the British. It ended in front of Chatham Middle School, the end of the 4th of July parade route as well as the site of the spring-fed pond before it was filled in. With every step participants were able to learn more about the town they grew up in. Walking along Main Street I would see children running up and down the street with the scavenger hunt in their hands looking for the next site and the answers for the questions.

Not only was it a very successful fundraiser, but it was so much more interesting. I learned so much more about my town and got to connect with so many people about a shared love for history. This has solidified my choice in going to college to pursue a major in History, a subject I truly love!