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Hello, Friends,

Happy almost October! We hope you're enjoying the crisp air, cool nights, and colorful foliage that fall brings. This month's issue is *extra* full, so be sure you click on the three dots on the bottom to view the entire newsletter!

It's a busy month ahead for us, so a quick calendar update filled with FREE events and a fundraiser, too; be sure to check our social media and website for all the most up to date info!

October 1 - Irish in Danbury roundtable discussion 1pm, **FREE**
October 7 & 8 - "Sell Your Old Gold" fundraiser (10-4 both days)
October 8 - Irish in Danbury Walking Tour 1pm **FREE**
October 14 - **FREE** CT Dept of Public Health Covid vaccination clinic 10-4
October 15 - Jack Stetson "The Great Danbury Fair" program 2pm, **FREE**
October 15 - Joe West & the Creative Force Band outdoor concert 4pm
FREE

When October starts, thoughts and memories, for Danburians near and far, turn to the Great Danbury State Fair. We'll be sharing amazing Danbury Fair photos during the first week of October across our social media platforms, and we're so very pleased to have a special Danbury Fair program presented by Jack Stetson on Saturday, October 15, at 2pm. In addition, we're thrilled to have a special piece, written by Jack Stetson as part of this month's newsletter.

We're happy to have new essays from both John O'Donnell and Dr Thomas MacGregor this month. John writes about a most interesting Titanic photographer, and Tom shares some observations of this year's drought.

Coming Friday, October 7, and Saturday, October 8, (10 - 4 both days) we'll be hosting the Friends of the Danbury Museum's "Sell Your Old Gold" Fundraiser. Mark your calendars, tell your friends, and start collecting that old/broken/no longer worn gold!

And don't forget, thanks to a generous grant from the Danbury Cultural Commission we're able to continue FREE admission through Saturday, December 17! That means FREE tours of not only the four historic buildings on our Main Street campus, but at the Ives Birthplace as well. Tours are on Fridays and Saturdays and you can book them via [Eventbrite](#). Our sincere thanks to the [Danbury Cultural Commission](#) for their support!

Happy October and we'll see you in November!

Brigid Guertin (*Executive Director, City Historian*)
Patrick Wells (*Research Specialist, Social Media Manager*)
Michele Lee Amundsen (*Collections Manager, Newsletter Editor*)



Young John W. Leahy and friend.

(Editor's Note: *For our October newsletter we thought we'd take a different approach to the Danbury Fair, and we've asked Jack Stetson to allow us to use a little snippet of a longer piece he wrote. He kindly agreed, and, not to date ourselves needlessly, here is some of, as Paul Harvey would say, "the rest of the story" of John W. Leahy and the making of the Great Danbury Fair that so many know and love.*)

"Heroes often seem to appear when the days are darkest. After WWII, the Danbury Fair found its hero in the personage of John W. Leahy.

John W. Leahy was born in June of 1895, upstairs at 9 Balmforth Avenue. He lived a typical Danbury boyhood, working at odd jobs after school, such as hawking the local newspaper or whatever else came along. Upon finishing the 8th grade at the Balmforth Avenue School, John learned the machinist trade as an apprentice at the Turner Machine Company. Later, he spent some time in the employ of the Mallory Hat Company, repairing and maintaining hat-making machinery.

Not being one to work in harness for long, John opened his own machine

shop (at the age of 20) on Crosby Lane in a building that literally hung over the Still River. He saw opportunity in the invention of the automatic oil burner for heating homes, and by 1928 had started delivering fuel oil and kerosene. In 1935, with the able assistance of his wife Gladys, he added a propane gas business.

As in many other local families, Fair Week was a big event in John's life, with every spare inch of floor filled with visiting relatives and friends. Leahy developed an interest in anything smacking of "show biz" as he'd always marveled at the new and unique. When the Capitol Theatre opened on Elm Street for the showing of "movin' pitchers," John was known to get his automatic grinding machines started on a run, take off to the Capitol for the matinee, and return in time to finish the job.

As fate would have it (the story goes) one morning a Mrs. Vail stopped in to pay an oil bill and began a conversation with John Leahy that ended with his purchasing a share of Danbury Fair stock that had been in family for years, for the sum of \$100. No shrinking violet he, Leahy soon found himself at the offices of G. Mortimer Rundle and George Nevius, Fair Secretary, and was apprised of the problems facing the organization. An eternal optimist and a man of boundless energy and enthusiasm, Leahy soon purchased more shares of stock from Rundle. On April 13, 1943, he found himself elected to the Board of Directors of the comatose Fair. At a meeting of the Board on August 24 of the same year, Gladys Leahy was nominated by her husband for membership on the board, and was duly elected; although she was most likely rather reluctant. At that same meeting the Board voted to borrow \$10,000 from John, and the seeds were sown which would eventually grow to become the revitalized Great Danbury Fair.

Never one to row with only one oar, John was committed to reopening the Fair and doing it in his own fashion. He spent his weekends visiting stockholders (many, several times) in an effort to purchase their stocks. Most of these shareholders owned only one share that often had been held in their family for generations and many were sold reluctantly. Leahy's persistence paid off and he eventually became the majority stockholder, aided mostly by his ability to convince Morty Rundle to part with a large portion of his shares. On January 6, 1944, John Leahy was elected to the office of General Manager of the Fair, a year later Gladys

was elected Treasurer, and the Leahy regime took off on a non-stop flight that would work wonders with the nearly defunct operation.

Attacking the job of refurbishing the grounds and buildings with the help of a small army of carpenters, painters, and laborers, Leahy began to rid the buildings of the dingy mustard-colored paint, replacing it with sparkling new coats of white and green.

The war ended and the fall of 1945 saw the resumption of midget auto racing shows. An entertainment-starved public jammed the grandstands every Saturday night and the races were run well into November that year, providing sorely needed funds to augment the repair effort

On November 30, 1945, the corporate name was changed to Danbury Fair, Inc., and in January of 1946 the Board set the dates of September 29 to October 6 for the run of the first Fair since 1941, and the first to be run by John W. Leahy and company.

Reconstruction and refurbishing continued at a wild pace through the summer of 1946, and expenditures grew just as rapidly. The Leahys estimated they needed an opening day paid attendance of well over 25,000 to set pace for a break even run. (The last several Fairs had produced opening day crowds of about 24,000, and those numbers were spurious at best.) Anxieties were high as opening day approached. Booths and stands were nearly sold out, shows, rides, and acts lay in readiness; ticket sellers and takers and security people, and various and sundry other help had been hired. The only factor that couldn't be predicted was the weather.

Thankfully, the rains of the night before opening night ceased in the early morning hours and the clouds burned off to provide a beautiful opening day. The people thronged from many miles around, having missed the annual Fair and having reason to get out and enjoy themselves with the end of the war and the return of the troops. At the end of opening day, over 42,000 patrons had paid to see the Fair. Tired and overwhelmed, everyone was ecstatic. The pressure of this unprecedented population did cause a few problems: wells went dry on the grounds, pumps that supplied water to restrooms burned out, and most of the food concessions were sold out by late afternoon.

Everyone scurried to remedy these problems, through the night, to be ready for the next day's onslaught. A couple of cold, rainy days depressed attendance a bit during the week, but the 1946 Fair finished with a paid attendance of 163, 456; an all-time attendance record! This record was not to be broken until 1961."



John W. Leahy



FRIENDS OF THE DANBURY MUSEUM

**"Sell Your
Old Gold"
Fundraiser**



FOR THIS FUNDRAISER,
YOUR CHECKBOOK STAYS HOME...
AND THIS TIME, YOU GO HOME
WITH A CHECK IN YOUR POCKET !!!

Please take a moment to look through your jewelry boxes at home for:

- BROKEN GOLD CHAINS AND BRACELETS
- SINGLE EARRINGS (HALF PAIRS)
- OLD SCHOOL RINGS
- RINGS WITH MISSING STONES
- OLD BOYFRIEND/GIRLFRIEND GIFTS
- JEWELRY YOU NEVER WEAR
- GOLD NON-WORKING WATCHES
- YES, EVEN DENTAL GOLD
- STERLING SILVER JEWELRY, FLATWARE, HOLLOWWARE
- PLATINUM AND PALLADIUM

THEN BRING IT WITH YOU TO:

THE DANBURY MUSEUM
43 MAIN STREET
DANBURY, CT

203.743.5200

Friday	October 7 th	10 AM to 4 PM
Saturday	October 8 th	10 AM to 4 PM

There, our good friend, Bob the gold man, will buy your "old gold" and hand you a check. Then, after the refining process, over 60% of the profits will be donated, in your name, to the **FRIENDS OF THE DANBURY MUSEUM!!!**

Any questions, please email: bob@libertygoldct.com

Sell Your Old Gold Fundraiser

Free Tours!

Thanks to a generous grant from the Danbury Cultural Commission, we are able to offer FREE tours of the Danbury Museum's historic buildings at 43 Main Street and the Charles Ives Birthplace.

Tours are Fridays & Saturdays, from September 10 through December 17, 2022.

Advance registration is required, please book via Eventbrite or DanburyMuseum.org

Book Your FREE Tours!



Father Francis Browne

A Titanic Photographer

By John O'Donnell

This year marks the one hundredth and tenth anniversary of the sinking of the Royal Mail Steamer Titanic. I have been interested in the Titanic saga since I was quite young. The first book that I ever took out with my adult library card was *A Night to Remember* by Walter Lord which is an excellent account of the sinking of this magnificent ship. Earlier this year I was able to assemble an over nine-thousand-piece LEGO model of the ship. Keeping up with my desire to know as much about this story I attended two programs at the Danbury Library and at the Bethel Library (by two different presenters) which were highly informative. One of the biggest things I learned from these programs was the story of Father Browne, a priest of the Jesuit order, who, by a twist of fate became an integral part of the story of the sinking of the Titanic.

Francis Browne was born on January 3, 1880, into a wealthy family in Cork, Ireland. He was the youngest of eight children of James and Brigid (nee Hegarty) Browne. His mother was the niece of William Hegarty, Lord Mayor of Cork, and a cousin of Sir Daniel Hegarty, the first Lord Mayor of Cork. Tragically, she died of puerperal fever shortly after Francis's birth. Sadly, he lost his father when he was nine years old in a drowning accident. Browne was raised and supported by his uncle Robert Browne, Bishop of Cloyne, who bought him his first camera before Francis

embarked on a European tour in 1897. Photography became a lifelong passion for him, and he became a very skilled practitioner of the craft. After receiving a rigorous education, he went on the tour of Europe mentioned above and took numerous photographs. One of his educational stops was at the Royal University, Dublin where he was a classmate of James Joyce. Joyce featured him as a character in *Finnegan's Wake*.

He is called Mr. Browne, the Jesuit, in the book. Francis had joined the Jesuits when he returned to Ireland after his European tour. He continued his education as well as his interest in photography. In 1909 he visited Rome with the Bishop of Cloyne (his uncle) and one of his brothers who was also a priest. They had a private audience with Pope Pius IX who allowed Francis to take his photograph. He studied at the Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy from 1911 to 1916. He seemed to be marked out for a quiet career as a priest in Ireland until he received another present from his uncle which dramatically altered his life.

In April 1912, his uncle purchased for him a first-class ticket for the maiden voyage of RMS Titanic from Southampton, England to Queenstown (now known as Cobh), Ireland via Cherbourg, France. He boarded the ship on April 10, 1912 and was in cabin A-37 on the promenade deck. His cabin was next to that of Thomas Andrews, the naval architect responsible for the design of the Titanic. Browne took dozens of photographs of life aboard the ship. He took photos of the gymnasium, the Marconi room, the first-class dining salon, his own cabin, and of passengers enjoying walks on the deck. He is responsible for the last known images of many of the crew including Captain Edward Smith, Purser Herbert McElroy, gymnasium manager T.W. McCawley and engineer William Parr. During the brief stay of Browne on the ship, he befriended an American millionaire and his wife who were seated with him at dinner. They quickly became friends and offered to pay his fare to New York and back if he would spend the voyage with them. Browne telegraphed his superior who replied: "Get off that Ship-Provincial."

Browne did disembark from the ship at Queenstown on April 11. He was taken off on the tender America. From the tender he snapped more photos of the ship including the last time the anchors were raised and more poignantly a shot of the entire vessel off the coast heading to her doom. Browne returned to Dublin to continue his theological studies. When news

of the sinking reached him, he realized how important his photos had become and negotiated their sale to various newspapers and news cartels. They immediately appeared in publications around the world. The Kodak Company gave him free film for life and he enthusiastically continued taking photographs for the rest of his life.

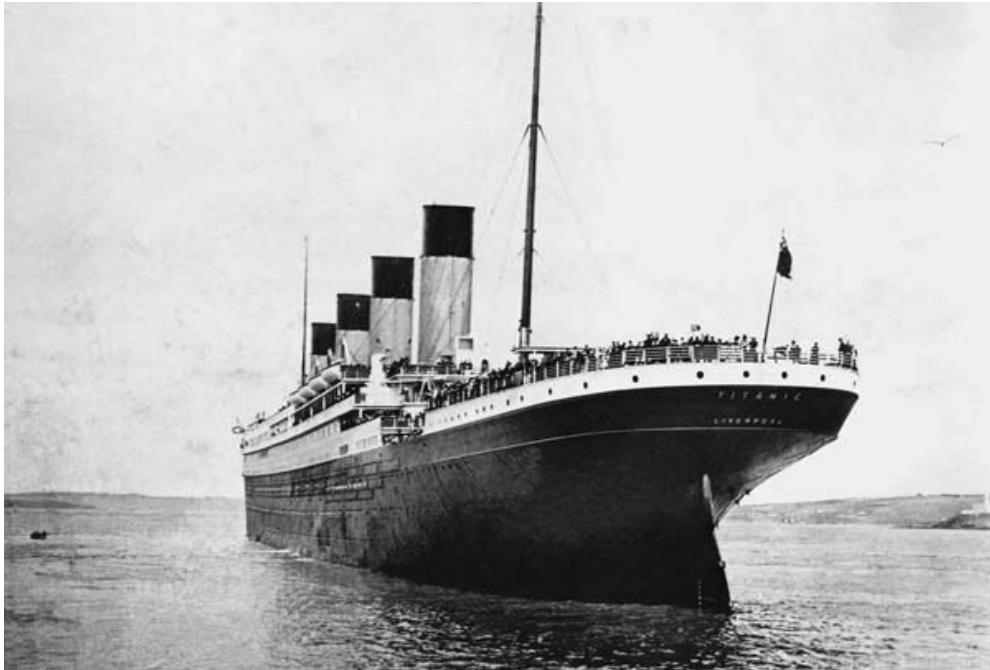
Browne completed his theological studies and was ordained on July 31, 1915. In 1916 he was sent to Europe during World War One to serve as a chaplain with the Irish Guards, with whom he had a distinguished career. He was wounded five times including being gassed (which impaired his health) and suffered severe shrapnel injuries to his jaw. He was awarded the Military Cross and the French and Belgian Croix de Guerre. He was described by Field Marshal Douglas Haig as “the bravest man I ever met.” He offered to serve again as a chaplain in World War Two, but he was refused.

Browne returned to his priestly duties in Ireland in 1920 and continued his enthusiasm for photography unabated. It is estimated that he took forty-two thousand photographs during his lifetime. He has been favorably compared to the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. Father Browne’s remarkable collection provides a superb picture of the way that the Irish lived during the first half of the twentieth century. The *Irish Times* has described him as being the “most important documentary historian of this century.” He died on July 7, 1960, and his name will forever be linked to the Titanic. We are indebted to his uncle for gifting him a camera and fostering his great career.

John O'Donnell first became a history devotee while in elementary school. He was raised in Brooklyn and frequently went to Prospect Park which has a Revolutionary War monument. He was hooked!



The author with his Titanic LEGO model!



RMS Titanic as photographed by Browne.



Drought Observations

by Thomas MacGregor

As I was thinking what to write about in my essay for this month, I received a telephone message from the mayor of Danbury asking all residents to conserve water as we were in a drought, i.e., a prolonged shortage in the water supply. Typically, Danbury should average nearly an inch of precipitation each week, but we had an unusually low rainfall for a good part of the summer.

Researching “drought” on the Internet revealed that there are different distinctions of this condition based on perspective. From my plants’ perspectives, a drought is less than average rainfall needed for growing and maturing. In this situation, many plants turn brown and enter a period of seasonal senescence. This type of drought is called a meteorological drought. From the mayor’s and a person’s perspective in the home, a drought is a significantly low reservoir or aquifer level that will result in difficulty providing fresh water for food preparation, showering, and watering lawns and gardens. This type is classified as a hydrological drought and is currently an extreme problem being experienced in the Western United States.

A week after the mayor's phone call, Danbury received about 5 inches of rainfall in a 24-hour period. The grass turned green and the flowers perked up. However, the TV meteorologist announced that Danbury remained in a moderate drought condition because the reservoirs were still low.

Walking through my gardens, I wondered which plants suffer the most during an extended rainfall shortage. Our bleeding hearts (*Lamprocapnos spectabilis*) and sensitive ferns (*Onoclea sensibilis*) took a beating from the heat and lack of rain this summer. However, the common purslane (*Portulaca sp.*) plants prospered in the heat and arid conditions. They are drought-tolerant, prefer sandy soil, and thrive under the blazing hot sun.

I received my first portulaca plant by accident. My neighbor has grown them for years, and I noticed one of them was growing in a crack in the street asphalt. I carefully dug it out and replanted it in a garden near the street where I have perennially had difficult maintaining flowering plants. The city's snowmelt applications over the winter may be the reason why. Much to my surprise, the portulaca plant grew well, and the following year there were many more portulaca plants due to self-reseeding, albeit only in one color, yellow. I then went out to other potholes in the street and looked for more portulaca plants in street cracks. Since we have lots of potholes in our neighborhood this year, I found a red-colored portulaca and inserted it into the sandy garden with the yellow ones. Next year, I hope to see a variety of yellow and red portulaca plants in this garden.

Some people consider portulacas to be weeds because they are found on roadsides and waste areas. The plant is a semi-succulent that stores water in its fleshy, bright green, pointy leaves and stems. It can multiply rapidly and gets "leggy" with a heavy rain because it is trying to store more water. That is what I observed this month within days after our 24-hour rain storm. The good news is that, as a pollinator plant, it attracted the honey bees. Of note, decreased production of honey is one of the first signs of a potential drought.

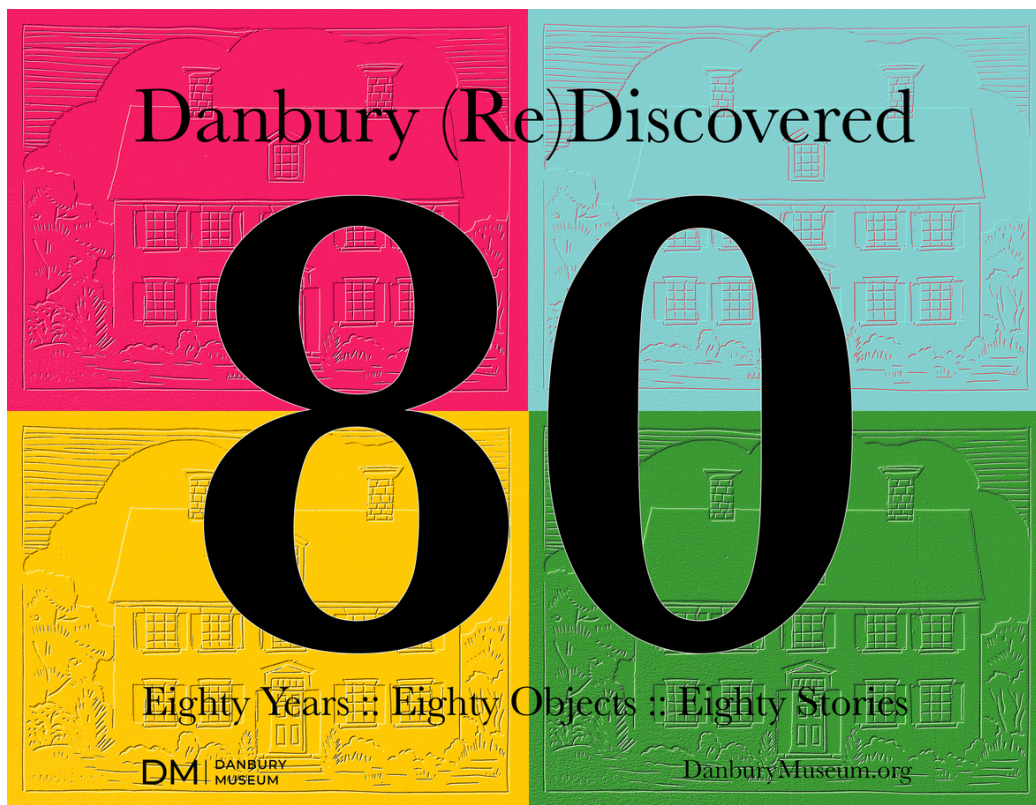
If you are interested in finding hearty plants for a difficult-to-grow flower garden, I encourage you to take a walk around your neighborhood, check all the cracks in the street for small, colorful flowers, and rescue them from on-coming cars and school buses by carefully transplanting them to thrive in your flower bed.

After 33 years at Boehringer Ingelheim, Dr. Tom (UConn '85) retired to his garden and piano.

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