

Roy Dickinson, 85, Had a Passion for Local History



By James Lomuscio

UPDATE (adds service details) Friends today described longtime Westporter Roy M. Dickinson, who died of heart failure at 85 Friday in Chester, as a prime mover of the Westport Historical Society (WHS), a Westport Library booster, Y's Men member, and a low key, gray eminence with a knack for convincing others to volunteer.



Roy Dickinson: active community volunteer. *Dave Matlow for WestportNow.com*

"Roy would be very interested in all kinds of activities that would be for the betterment of the town, but he was low key about it," said Wally Woods, who first met Dickinson in 1996.

Woods now lives in Westbrook, "one town over from Clinton," where Dickinson and his wife Betsy bought a house in 2010.

Denise Woods, Wally's wife, said that the Dickinsons also purchased an apartment in Chester at a retirement community known as Chester Village West "after Roy's health started to decline."

"They moved in just a short while ago, keeping both residences active, but the Chester place became their sole home where Roy was able to move around in his motorized chair and be under the constant care of the nursing staff," Denise Woods said.

"Roy had to be hospitalized for a few days but returned to Chester Village West on Monday and sadly died there on the 14th."

According to Facebook, Dickinson grew up in New Jersey, graduating Chatham High School in 1946. He went on to Swarthmore College, graduating in 1950 with a B.A. in chemistry, and received an MBA from Rutgers in 1956.

His corporate career included stints with Union Carbide and Pfizer. At Pfizer he was director of business development before retirement.

In Westport, his myriad activities also included the Representative Town Meeting (RTM), where he became deputy moderator, the Aspetuck Land Trust, Parks and Recreation Commission, the Green's Farms Congregational Church, and the Republican Town Committee.

According to Woods, Dickinson also had relatives in Connecticut who rose to prominence making witch hazel, now Dickinson Brands, Inc. in East Hampton. He also had a passion for local history.

He and late wife Joan lead fundraising efforts to purchase the Wheeler House, now WHS headquarters, "and he was responsible for rebuilding the octagonal barn, and getting everybody involved in creating the new gallery at the Historical Society," Woods said.

Woods recalled he was living on North Avenue when Dickinson, widowed and then WHS president, stopped by to see a mutual friend, and wound up convincing Woods to join the Historical Society. Woods took his advice, and eventually became the organization's president.

"He was charming, outgoing but low key in that he was he was able to convince you that it was in your best interest to do what he had in mind," said Woods.

That year Dickinson also convinced historic preservationists that the town's history had to be chronicled in mainstream book. For that he tapped Woody Klein, the editor of the Westport News who gave up his post to work on the book full time.

In 2000 "Westport Connecticut: The Story of a New England Town's Rise to Prominence" was published; its forward was written by Joanne Woodward.

"Roy Dickinson was one of the most decent and honorable men I have ever met," said Klein, who described Dickinson as a close friend "and a Renaissance man above all else."

"His interests were eclectic," Klein said.

According to Klein, Dickinson, serving as chairman of the RTM's ad hoc transit advisory committee in 1973, urged the establishment of the Westport Transit District. In his book, Klein writes that Dickinson stressed "such a transportation system would benefit commuters, the elderly, and youngsters too young to drive."

Westporter Jo Fuchs Luscombe, who serves on the WHS advisory council, also claimed Dickinson as a close friend. She said that she and her husband and Dickinson and his wife Betsy went on several vacations together, "Curacao, Maui, and Block Island."

"I can't tell you how sad I was by Roy's death," she said. "I've known him for 40 some odd years, ever since I moved to Westport, and we worked on numerous projects together, mostly the Historical Society and the library."

"His first wife Joan and I were on the committee fundraising team that helped to raise the money to buy Wheeler House, and Roy went on to do many great things," Fuchs Luscombe said.

"For the library, he and I were on the teams that raised the money for the second phase of the library (construction) in 1996."

Woods said that he received word of Dickinson's death from Katie Chase of the WHS, who later said the Green's Farms Church told her a service will be held there Saturday, March 1, at 11 a.m.

Family-supplied obituary:

Roy M. Dickinson, one of Westport's longstanding civic leaders in the environmental, historical and town government arenas, died Friday, Feb. 14, from heart failure at his home in Chester, according to his wife, Betsy. He had been ill for a number of months.

In Westport, he served in a variety of volunteer posts, among them Parks and Recreation commissioner, Conservation Commission chairman, president of both the Westport Historical Society, the Y's Men, and deputy moderator of the Representative Town Meeting.

He was also a director of the Aspetuck Land Trust, a member of the Republican Town Committee, and a member of the Green's Farms Congregational Church.

Born in Newark, N.J., on Jan. 2, 1929, he was a graduate of Swarthmore College in 1950 with a B.S. degree in chemistry. In 1953, he received a chemical engineering degree from the University of Delaware, and an MBA in 1959 from Rutgers University. He was a Korean War veteran, having served as an officer in the U.S. Air Force in 1953.

He worked at Union Carbide Corp. from 1960 until 1974 when he left for Pfizer. During those years he and his wife Joan, and young sons Mark and Ty, lived overseas for a time in Switzerland and Belgium.

Dickinson had a long career with Pfizer as an executive for 20 years prior to his retirement in 1994. He was in charge of the company's efforts in the water purification area and brought water to areas of the world with limited access to it.

He was a member of the American Chemical Society from 1950 to 1985, and the Chemical Market Research Association, from 1955 to 1994.

As president of the Historical Society in the late 1990s, Dickinson was instrumental, along with former WHS president Arnold K. (Pete) Wolgast in the publication of a book on Westport's history, titled, "Westport, Connecticut, The Story of a New England Town's Rise to Prominence."

Written by former Westport News writer Woody Klein, it was edited by Dickinson, designed by Miggs Burroughs, and published in 2000 on the 165th anniversary of the founding of the town in 1835.

Former WHS president Arnold J. (Pete) Wolgast commented: "Roy was a tremendous asset to the Westport community. He was always looking for what was best for Westport."

Added Klein: "Roy is a superb editor with a fine mind. He was a man of the highest integrity and always enjoyable to be with."

Dickinson and his wife, Elizabeth (Betsy) Balch Dickinson were married on July 3, 1998. Since then they have taken many trips together, including New Zealand, Hong Kong, Thailand and Vietnam.

They especially enjoyed an around the world plane trip sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation which took them to the Galapagos Islands, Easter Island and Papua New Guinea.

In the sports arena, Dickinson enjoyed skiing, tennis and biking. Throughout his life he enjoyed books and biographies about World War II and its heroes, especially Winston Churchill.

In 2010, he and Betsy left Westport for Clinton to seek a more tranquil life close to the ocean. He took great pleasure tending his apple trees and blueberry bushes.

Enjoying the peacefulness and beauty of their marsh side home in Clinton gave them great happiness over the last three and a half years.

While living in Clinton, Roy worked with Wally Woods of Westbrook, also formerly of Westport, to produce an historic House Tour Booklet, which coincided with their celebration of the 350th anniversary of Clinton's founding.

Due to Roy's declining health, in December 2013, the Dickinsons became members of an assisted living community, Chester Village West, in Chester, while retaining their home in Clinton.

Dickinson, a history buff, was descended from Nathaniel Dickinson, of Cambridgeshire, England, and Hadley, Mass.

From 1600 to 1676, Dickinson's ancestors settled in Haddam, Colchester, Ansonia, and many other eastern towns. His mother, Georgia MacGregor Brown, emigrated from Glasgow, Scotland, married his father, Clarence William Dickinson, of Waverly, N.Y. and moved with him to Albuquerque, N.M. in their later years.

Survivors include his wife, Elizabeth Balch Dickinson, his brother and his wife, William Dickinson and Lee Dickinson, of Ridgefield; His sons and their wives and children include: Mark Dickinson and Lisl Dickinson, of Atlanta, Ga., Griffin Dickinson, 9, and Carter Dickinson 7; John (Ty) Dickinson, and Pamela Dickinson, of Lincoln, Mass., and their children, Catharine (Cat) Dickinson, 19, Micaela (Caley) Dickinson, 17, Sibley Dickinson, 14, and Reese Dickinson, 12. Stepsons and stepdaughters and their spouses and children include Douglas Hopkins, and Kyle Hopkins, of Buffalo, N.Y. and their children, Eliza Hopkins, 19, and Abigail Hopkins, 15. His stepdaughter Laura Hopkins also of Buffalo, N.Y. and her children, Finley Baba, 22, and John (Jack) Baba, 18; a stepson, Timothy Hopkins, and Aliina Hopkins of West Hartford, and their children, Sarah Hopkins, 22, Caroline Hopkins, 19, Grace Hopkins, 16, and Margaret (Maggie) Kinabrew, 15.

Roy's first wife, Joan Hartig Dickinson, predeceased him in 1995.

A memorial service will be held at Green's Farms Congregational Church in Westport on Saturday March 1, at 11 a.m. with a reception at the church to follow.

In lieu of flowers for the service, please send flowers to a loved one in memory of Roy.

Posted 02/17 at 12:49 AM