

# LET'S GO LETTERBOXING

Story by Caron Wunderlich • Photos by Karrie Knowles

**W**hat is it that motivates entire families to hike through the woods, traipse across cemeteries, and scale stone walls, rain or shine, even with dogs in tow?

Believe it or not, it's a rubber stamp inside a plastic box. This is letterboxing, a hobby to some; and obsession to others. Letterboxing is a form of orienteering that has become a national pastime and a fun way of learning about history.

Robin Tavares of Norwich started letterboxing with her eldest son in 2008. At the time she was pregnant with her second child, Derek, who is now in kindergarten. She said it was something she could do to occupy her then third grader, Owen, that was educational and inexpensive.

"I was broke and it's free," Tavares says.

Letterboxing is a treasure hunt of sorts. Cryptic, Da-Vinci Code-like clues can be found on various websites. Participants print out the clues, take their packs filled with supplies, and head out in search of the letterbox. Each letterbox contains a rubber stamp personalized to that box, and a logbook. Upon finding the box, you stamp the logbook in the box with your stamp, then stamp your own log book with the stamp from the letterbox. Special notes may be left in letterboxes for other

visitors to see.

Tavares invited us to join her, along with son Derek, and Derek's friends Wyatt and Sam on a letterbox hunt. We meet at the old burial ground in Norwichtown that is adjacent to the tomb of Samuel Huntington, one of the Founding Fathers of Norwich.

Tavares leads us through the cemetery past ancient headstones to locate the first box. The main clue for this letterbox involves a lunette carving on the headstone of Anne Lane. "The face is blank and staring," the clue says. Carved by John Hartshorne, these ornate carvings are now faded and worn, making them difficult to spot. "This cemetery is 'lunette carver heaven,'" the clue states. We find the stone of Anne Lane, as well as the stone table next to her grave as designated in the clues. "Continue until you reach a stone wall. Now follow the wall for 11 steps walking SE to multi trunk tree."

"I know it was here because we've found it before," Tavares says. But today this box evades her. Tavares and her gang climb the wall into a clearing between a thicket of trees. "I think it was in this tree," she says. Still we can't find the box and Tavares fears it may have been stolen. She explains that it sometimes happens, though not often.

We concede and continue across the footbridge up the hill and through the meadow to the cemetery







At Above: Derek Towner and Wynn  
Kemp group in a forest. Right:  
Robin Taylor and her family and  
Wynn group.



# RESOURCES

There are letterboxes hidden all over Norwich, as well as in all 32 Connecticut State Forests. Many are located at historical sites. To search for clues and find locations, visit these websites:

- www.letterboxing.org
- www.ct.gov/deep
- atlasquest.com
- www.leffingwellhousemuseum.org

Or check *The Letterboxer's Companion*, by Randy Hall, The Globe Pequot Press, out of Otis Library. It's an easy-to-follow, step by step guide that's great for beginners.

## NATHANIEL PARK TRAIL

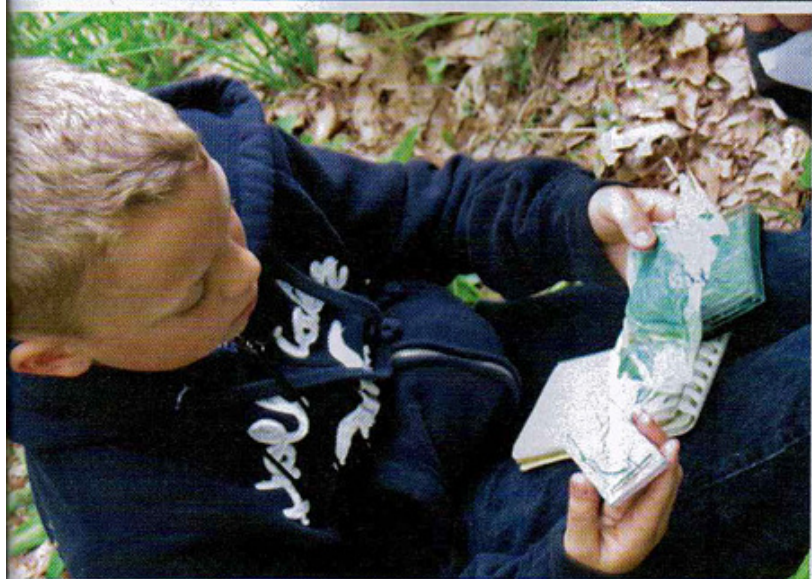
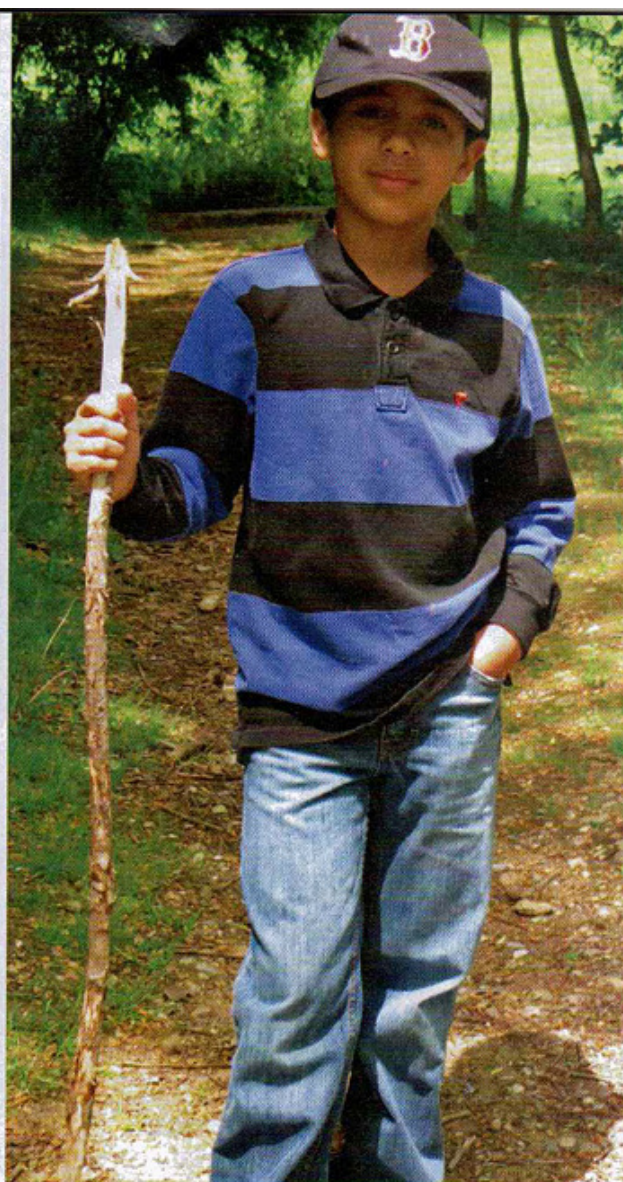


Health -  
FISH -

- Fitness - Success  
JOG - ENJOY NATURE  
LEDYARD"







Clockwise from top: Letterboxing gear; Sam Knowles on the trail; Peter Throop finds the treasure. Opposite page: Carl Russek studies clues.

behind the Samuel Huntington House. The clues for this letterbox tell us to go north to a break in the stone wall. Young Sam reaches into the wall and feels for the box. "I found it!" he declares. This box is named, "Foraging Black Raspberry," and was left by "The 3 Foragers." "You have to be very careful because you have to put it back the way you found it," Tavares says.

Along the way, Tavares talks about the history of lunette carving, Samuel Huntington, the burial ground, and other historical facts about the location. She mentions that there is a letterbox located at the Leffingwell Inn as well as many other locations in Norwich. "It teaches you about history," she says of the letterbox hunts. "You trick them into learning."

The origin of letterboxing has been traced back to 1854 England when a

hiker at Dartmoor National Park left a message in a bottle encouraging others to do the same. Today, there are more than 10,000 in the park.

"Letterboxing in the U.S. is divided into the pre-Smithsonian and post-Smithsonian eras," said Melodye Whatley, a longtime letterbox enthusiast and Yantic resident. Whatley is referring to a *Smithsonian Magazine* article published in April 1998 that has been credited with launching the craze.

According to the website, letterboxing.org, the Eastern Mountain Sports store in nearby Waterford's Crystal Mall played a big part in advancing letterboxing in the U.S. when it began listing letterbox clues for boxes hidden by customers in Connecticut and Rhode Island. Eastern Connecticut in particular has taken to

letterboxing. Letterboxing.org lists 640 boxes in New London County, and 339 in Windham County. Thirty-five letterboxes are listed in Norwich.

On websites dedicated to letterboxing clues, such as letterboxing.org, you can search by state, county or city/town for letterboxing clues.

On our cemetery hike, the last box we find is located near the tomb of Samuel Huntington. This one is aptly named, "Patriot," and contains a hand-carved stamp engraved with Huntington's image. Derek finds this box, which also contains instructions on letterboxing. Tavares looks through the box, and suddenly her voice changes. "Oh, look! Owen's old handwriting," she says in that dreamy way a mother has when she sees old papers or photos of her child. Tavares has found





Jeffrey Throop



more in this box than just a rubber stamp. The box contains a note written by her older son when they found it in 2008. She carefully places the contents back the way she found them. "They get so excited to find it," Tavares says. "We've been out here for like an hour and all I did was go on the internet."

Humans are not the only ones who enjoy letterboxing. On another letterboxing hunt, we join Dog Scouts of America Troop 188 at the Nathan Lester House in Ledyard. Eight dog scouts accompanied by their people head off to a trail that leads us deep in the woods.

As we hike the trail, the hazards of letterboxing become apparent. Poison ivy, ticks, mosquitoes, and the crawling creatures that reside in crevices and rocks along with the sought after letterbox are an ever-present concern, but those in the know always exercise caution. This group has all been sprayed with bug repellent before heading into the woods.

We mention the missing letterbox in Norwich. "Sometimes they're pulled for maintenance," says Sheri Throop, who is joined by her three nephews on this hunt.

"Usually they're hidden well enough that somebody wouldn't see them

without the clues," says Throop's nephew, 16-year-old Carl Russak. He adds that some boxes located in high traffic areas may be mistaken for trash and discarded. Throop promises to take us back to Norwichtown to find the elusive box, which she says she found just last week.

The locations of the letterboxes are closely guarded by those who participate and there is a name for those who would steal the coveted boxes. These culprits are called "muggles," a name borrowed from the Harry Potter series which refers to one who is lacking in magical ability. The moniker clearly identifies non-letterbox-



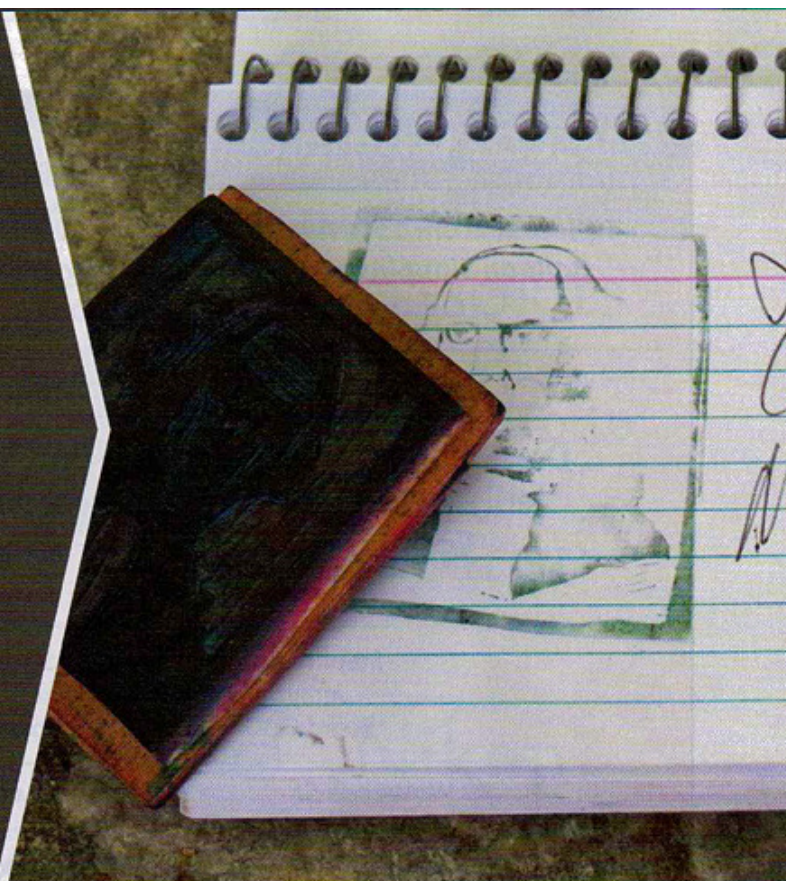
# GETTING STARTED

To begin with you'll need:

- A "trail name"
- Pencil or pen, rubber stamp and ink pad
- Sketch book
- Compass
- Clues
- Bug spray

Letterbox enthusiast Melodye Whatley suggests a few additional essentials:

- A walking stick "To poke into holes and see what's in there!"
- Flashlight to shine in the holes.
- Wet wipes, as "ink will invariably get on your hands."
- A "sit upon," which can be a sheet, blanket or towel.



ers as outsiders.

We find the first letterbox near the remains of the Ledyard Oak. The historic tree was declared dead in 1969, and Throop points out a young oak tree that was planted about two years ago next to the old stump. She says the new tree is fed by the decaying roots of the once proud Ledyard Oak. The box we find was planted here several years ago by her dog scout, Lucy.

Inside this box is a piece of paper with the image of a smiling man. Above his image the words, "We miss you," are printed along with "Hike: 11-25-2010." On the page are several signatures, some in what appears to be a child's handwriting. Throop assumes this to be a memorial to the man left by loved ones.

We find the last box behind the house. It contains a "hitchhiker." A hitchhiker is a stamp that can be moved from letterbox to letterbox. "Some have gone from state to state," says Russak. Hitchhikers may be left in the original box if you are not going on to another site. "We will take this one because we're going to Norwich," says Throop.

Shortly after we arrive back at the Norwich Burial Ground, the box that had eluded us two days before is found. This one is named, "Lunette-John Hartshorne #1," as a tribute to the artist who carved the beautiful headstones used as clues.

While her nephews are "stamping in," to the newly-found letterbox, Throop asks them if they would like to see where their great-great-great-great grandfather is buried. As it happens, Throop and her nephews are descendants of Samuel Huntington himself. This will be the boys' first visit to the tomb of their ancestor. "He signed the Declaration of Independence," 10-year-old Peter says proudly. Perhaps letterboxing is about much more than a rubber stamp inside a plastic box after all.

