

Schenectady County Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 39 - Number 3-4 March - April 2002

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CALENDAR

Saturday, March 9, 2002

1:30: Refreshments

**2:00: Program: Farming in Schenectady County
from the 19th Century to the present**

Presenters: Robert Sager and Matthew Thornton

Tuesday, March 19, 2002

7:30 PM

Board of Trustees

Saturday, April 6, 2002

Society is closed

Saturday, April 13, 2002

1:30: Refreshments

**2:00 Program: George Featherstonehaugh.
Mariaville Farmer, and man of all seasons**

Presenter: Bill Massoth

Tuesday, April 16, 2002

7:30 PM

Board of Trustees

Saturday, May 24, 2002

and Monday, May 25, 2002

Society is closed

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

When Ruth and I looked to buy our first home, a fireplace was near the top of our wish list. We probably had seen too many movies in our youth for neither of us came from homes that had a fireplace. A recent "Grand Avenue" cartoon probably summed up the attraction of a fireplace without a "spoken" word. The first panel depicted a young girl reading a summary of the past year's news, while her dog sits mesmerized by a fire in the fireplace. In the final panel the news magazine has been abandoned and the girl has joined her dog to watch the dancing flames.

Besides not having a fireplace, the house of my youth didn't even have a furnace. In the winter a potbelly stove was set up in the dining room between the doorways to my parent's bedroom and the kitchen. In our house Santa Claus had to come through the front door.

Our front room was closed off from the dining room by a pair of pocket doors. Access to the second floor bedrooms, where my sister, brother and I slept, was by way of stairs in the front room. Our bedrooms were well isolated from the heat source except for a registered hole in the dining room ceiling. There were no storm

windows and in the winter the windows could have a half-inch thick buildup of ice. What a blessing it was when a furnace was installed, although I don't think a duct ever got as far as my sister's room.

When Ruth was a child her home had a really great hot-air furnace. It had one duct which ran from its top to a four foot square grill in the floor directly overhead. This was a great place to congregate in the winter after coming inside after being exposed to the chilly winds off Lake Erie. A woman's skirt would billow out due to the rising current of heated air (but not to the extent of Marilyn Monroe's famous photograph). Heat to the second floor bedrooms had to traverse a doorway to get to the stairway. The door was the heat register. This house is now owned by a nephew. We hear he's put in a new furnace and removed walls. But we've been reluctant to venture inside to see the changes.

But I've strayed away from fireplaces. The early colonial house of this area had jambless fireplaces. Jambs are side walls. Therefore jambless means there were no sides. There was a hearth and a back wall of brick or stone centered on one of the room's walls. The fireplace was part of the room and was intended to be walked into when used for cooking meals.

A large opening in the ceiling was the entrance to the chimney flue. The chimney was supported by ceiling beams which defined the flue entrance. At the Mabee farm the ca. 1680 living room has a flue entrance that measures 3'3" x 8'4". 12" wide boards were hung from the chimney support beams to act as a hood to divert smoke to the flue. Although the fireplaces were gigantic by today's standards, restraint had to be used to keep the fires small enough not to ignite the support beams.

While everyone seems to know that hot air rises, when they go to light a fire in a fireplace they find out the opposite is also true: cold air in the chimney flue drops, causing a back draft. Smoke gets in your eyes. It floods into the room. The crux of the fireplace design problem was how to accommodate both the rising warm air and the down flowing cold air.

The developer of a practical solution to this problem was a Massachusetts-born (1753), ingenious man named Benjamin Thompson. Basically self-educated, he performed scientific experiments on practical problems such as ballistics and convection (the flow of a fluid due to differences in temperature) while supporting himself as a gigolo and with espionage. In 1776, the 23-year-old Thompson went to London to explain to the authorities why it was necessary for British troops to withdraw from Boston. He was never to go home again. The next spying venture was for the British in Bavaria. The Bavarians liked him so much they made him a Count of the Holy Roman Empire for his scientific work, military genius, and for putting the beggars of Munich to work (making military supplies). He was now Count Rumford. Rumford, New Hampshire, was the home of his first wife.

This work on convection had an application to the problem of smoky fireplaces. He introduced a smoke shelf at the bottom of the backside of the chimney flue. This deflected the cold air forward. The warm air from the fire chamber enters the flue at a narrow opening along the front side. The warm and cold air intermingle and rise up the front face of the flue. And 200 years later it's still the same concept.

Along with the flue changes Rumford promoted smaller, more efficient fireplaces with documentation of chamber depth relative to opening size. Late in his life he invented the first photometer and articulated the concept of candle-power. He also developed the steam-heated radiator and introduced the first central heating system.

Rumford's life was a dichotomy. He was respected and honored on the one hand and hated and despised on the other. He tried to go back to the United States as the first superintendent of the military academy at West Point. But the British delighted in revealing his spying record on their behalf during the Revolutionary War and that was the end of that idea. Rumford died in France in 1814. Besides his legacy of the understanding of heat flow and its practical application, he endowed a chair at Harvard to recognize scientific researchers. This was his token apology to the land of his birth.

MARCH PROGRAM

Elliesse Reamer and Irma Mastrean have been exploring our own rich archive of slide shows and have come up with what looks like a winner: Farming in Schenectady from the 19th to the 21st centuries. Farming is ever timely, especially in these days of agri-business and genetic modification. A good chance to remind ourselves of where we have come from. Robert Sager will be the "voice-over" and Matthew Thornton has agreed to run the projector. Come at 1:30 and sip tea or coffee with friends before the meeting.

APRIL PROGRAM

Aren't we lucky to have Bill Massoth, creator of so many fascinating historical slide shows? This time it's George Featherstonehaugh, a Mariaville farmer. That's like saying George W. Bush has a cattle farm. Featherstonehaugh was also the first United States geologist, he was an explorer in the Mid-West, and even an ambassador to England. And according to my informant, his grandson founded the Historical Society. What more could we ask? Incidentally there are seventeen letters in Featherstonehaugh which makes it the longest surname I believe I have encountered.

PICTURES From the January Program

Scott Haefner, Mabee Farm Site Manager and Rotterdam Town Historian, filled in another little corner of local history for us, telling us of Rotterdam Junction and the railroads that put that locality on the map.

PICTURES From the February Program

Welcome back to Frank Taormina and another of his thoroughly researched historical talks. This was a "power point" presentation; the subject was Chester Arthur and the discourse was punctuated with excellent projection of illustrative images. Put down Chester Arthur as another Union College Alumnus who did well.

WE NEED MORE INPUT!

We need reporters from the various towns in order to improve our diversity. Remember when Elsie did such a column? Irma Mastrean could be our reporter from Princetown and Scott Haefner could be our reporter from Rotterdam. Ed Reilly would be a natural for Niskayuna, or maybe Frank Taormina. Bill Massoth could certainly find something on Duaneburg, and Elsie Maddaus could cover Glenville. But anyone from any of those areas can play.

What we envision is just a short paragraph, some little tidbit about a local event or historical figure. We'll call the department "Around the County" and let Bob Sager be the Guru from Belleview. And you could send your item to the Editor by email: slbvs@earthlink.net.

How about it?

MUSEUM NEWS [valentine pictures]

Jo Mordecai Coordinator of Exhibits

Project Time

During February and March our second floor is off limits to visitors, as we are having many important projects completed. The Glen Sanders bedroom will have a beautiful new ceiling, complete with lights - the room has been gloomy - and with ceiling lighting the newly restored paintings will now be seen in their true glory.

The British are Coming! The British are Coming!

During May to July the next exhibit in the Vrooman Room will feature a large collection of the Commemoratives of the Royal families of England. Items include china plates, cups and saucers, mugs, jugs, candy dishes, ashtrays, egg cups etc. All were made to celebrate special occasions such as weddings, coronations, silver and golden jubilees. Such items were made during the reigns of Queen Victoria, Edward VII and Alexandra, George V and Mary, Edward VIII who abdicated, George VI and Elizabeth and of course Elizabeth II. The first commemoratives were made during the reign of George III to celebrate his son's christening. Currently in England they are celebrating the Golden Jubilee of Elizabeth II: she was crowned on July 2, 1952, and is the third monarch to reign so long - all were women: Elizabeth I, Victoria and Elizabeth II. Needless to say, the items shown are very interesting and very collectable. Our exhibit will be an American tribute to Elizabeth's fifty years -- but on the other side of the pond.

-Jo Mordecai

LIBRARY DOINGS Virginia LaGoy, Librarian

REDUCED!! 2002 calendars with photos of Schenectady's past from our files. Buy a few--just \$5 each.

Republished: The Story of the Schenectady Massacre - Now for sale - Just \$3.

WE ARE LOOKING FOR: Heritage Hunters newsletters from Saratoga County

Chair mats

Pencils (for our patrons' use)

Volunteers

Schenectady County school yearbooks and elementary school photo albums

Telephone books from the 1970's

Metal bookends

NEW! Look -ups now available on our website. Obituaries and marriage notices from 19th century Schenectady newspapers. See our website for details and form.

DONATIONS AND ACQUISITIONS

BOOKS: Muster Rolls for New York State, 5 volume set -- Ruth Ann Evans Memorial gift

CD: Metamorphosis Southern Style by R. Chase Raiford (family history including Clute)

COMING SOON!!! 1930 FEDERAL CENSUS - APRIL 1st

PAINTING CONSERVATION REPORT [picture] by Ona Curran

RESTORATION OF PORTRAIT OF MAYOR JOHN ISAAC DE GRAFF (1783-1848)

Thanks to a very generous contribution from Edward De Graff of Mount Morris NY, a descendant of John Isaac De Graff, the former mayor's portrait is being restored. The society is most grateful to Mr. De Graff. John Isaac DeGraff was a lawyer, judge and mayor of Schenectady. Cornelius Van Patten, a Schenectady artist, painted the portrait in 1846. Mr. Edward De Graff is a very active 97 year old. He is retired from Rochester Gas and Electric, has farmed 1200 acres, flown a biplane, built houses and is an avid historian, genealogist and, in recent years, a sculptor. The portrait was a gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald A Keefer in 1954.

This Ode to Math was found in a stack of papers dating from 1860 - 1880.

A Good-bye to My Algebra

And so I must say good-bye to you, my friend, you whose company I have so much enjoyed, who I have laughed and cried over.... I have several reasons for liking you better than any of my other studies. One is that I have had something to myself. I have been obliged to think a little instead of only learning the words that are written in you. Another is that you have held truthful. Though you have asserted many things that at first seemed hard to believe and still harder to understand, you have always proved and explained clearly and satisfactorily. You have been the means of making me both sad and happy; happy when I could and sad when I could not understand your explanations or solve some problems you have given, as well as some of the brighter ones in my class. Instead of your being a hard day study, you have been a sort of recreation to me, for when I think of chemistry, philosophy or some other study I have opened you, and forgotten them while trying to {this was illegible} some difficult example or write out some formula. Though I am to give you up as a study, I hope I shall not forget all I have learned from you. The Alphabet hereafter instead of only seeming to be useful in spelling will remind one of the many ways you have made use of it in proving your assertions. May many others enjoy the study of your pages as I have.

Good-bye

{No signature}

THOSE WERE THE DAYS . . . [college prices]

MABEE FARM PROJECT

Save these dates! May 18th and May 19th, 2002

On those days The Mabee Farm Historic Site will host a Revolutionary War reenactment. The program will be presented by the 2nd Albany Militia and by their invitation will include other militia and groups from throughout eastern New York. There are expected to be about 100 participants in period dress. Settlers, militiamen and Indians will be represented. The theme will be the conditions, attitudes and personal conflicts just prior to the Revolutionary War. The day reenacted will be May 17th, 1775.

The enactors will assemble Friday and camp overnight. We will be open to the public Saturday at 9 o'clock. During the morning there will be various activities: political debates, campfire cooking, household chores, musters, all reflective of the time. An Indian party may canoe down the river to trade with the settlers. Special emphasis will be on children's programs and involvement. By 3 o'clock events will progress to an actual skirmish between factions. This will be followed by a field surgery demonstration. After dinner a liberty pole and flag will be raised, followed by a committee of safety meeting. You are invited to a dance in the Dutch barn to end the day. Sunday starts with a church service at 9 o'clock. Activities similar to Saturday's will lead to another skirmish about 3 o'clock. Breakdown is scheduled for 4:30.

Food will be available.

Mornings Coffee, tea and snack buns, etc.

Lunch Sandwiches and soups,

Dinner Hearty stew and bread

Admission will be charged while parking

Meanwhile . . . A Summary of Last Year's Developments. (Excerpts from the Season End Report)

2001 was the first year we were open for regular hours. Attendance numbered some 1500 visitors from all over the country and even Europe and Australia.

We moved Mabee possessions from storage to the barn: the two exhibits shown were the Mabee family quilts and fabrics, and a pictorial exhibit of Rotterdam Junction and local Mohawk Valley compiled by Dick Whalen.

Facilities improved: the Brick house has been stabilized; roof flashings were replaced on the Stone house and the porch was painted floor to ceiling; the main room's walls were painted and more suitable furnishings were installed. A parking area has been delineated with excess barn timbers. And many more such!

The goal for this year is to build on this experience, refining our Mabee House tours with trained volunteer docents and a more focused program. Hours will be Wed-Sat, 10 - 4. We will begin the process of having professionally designed exhibits and active demonstrations. In the fall a major renovation of the Inn is planned to fix the failing sills and floor joists.

In addition to the work on the Inn, we'll build a wagon type shed for our growing collection of large farm machinery. We have just acquired a small, early wood-framed Dutch Building which we will use as a working blacksmith shop. We now have a large roto-tiller so we are able to start an herb and kitchen garden.

Our most important task will be to expand our education and special events programs. We will install in one half of the Dutch barn a professionally designed children's exhibit geared to meet the 4th grade curriculum. Other exhibits include antique tools and a broom making shop. And of course we'll be hosting a Revolutionary War Reenactment on May 18th and 19th.

We're getting closer to our goal of being an important cultural and educational resource in the community.

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING DEPARTMENT

Wanted!

Someone to do filing in the library. Our librarian can never catch up.

Great opening for volunteer with unsatisfied clerical lust! Call librarian at 374-0263

Wanted!

Someone to do data entry on one of our wonderful computers. You do not have to be a computer geek; you just need enthusiasm for the work of the society plus the ability to follow directions. Call librarian at 374-0263

Wanted!

A real extrovert to organize boat and bus trips. There are wonderful places to go around here, but all the board members are maxed out and we need fresh blood, verve, muscle and know-how to plan trips. Call office at 374-0263

Wanted!

A grant writer. We know the grants are out there; we just need that certain person with the time to ferret out where the grants are hidden so we can continue to enhance the work of the Society. Call President or office manager at 374-0263

Wanted!

Docents. A docent is a tour guide. We're running out of docents and we want fresh troops. Come now: you know that you've always secretly wanted to show people around the Museum. Follow Jo or Sally or Wayne or Ann a time or two and you'll get the hang of it. Call Jo Mordecai at 374-926 for further information.

POSTCARD OF THE MOMENT

Around about 1912 you might have seen this toll gate at the aqueduct at Rexford. Just one of the many postcards available from the Schenectady County Historical Society {all posted elsewhere on our website}.

THE ODYSSEY OF MOSES VINEY

Part Six: Death Sets Old Slave Free by Neil Yetwin

(In this final chapter, we say "farewell" to an admirable person who could be deemed a true Schenectadian by virtue of the life he lived and the contributions he made to this city a hundred and fifty odd years ago.)

Though now self-employed, Moses Viney continued to maintain close ties to Union College. Each year he would make an appearance at the annual alumni dinner held at the Schenectady Armory, carrying with him Eliphalet Nott's old ivory-headed cane. "To shake him by the hand and to have a word or two of conversation with him," reported the Union College ConCORDIENSES of January 15, 1900, "has been as much pleasure for the alumni as it has been to meet their classmates at the reunion." The Schenectady Evening Star characterized Moses as "the most noted and picturesque figure on the streets."

During the last decade of his life, Moses began to suffer from rheumatism as well as heart and kidney trouble. "Moses Viney, who has been confined indoors for some time," stated the ConCORDIENSES of April 18, 1900, "is out and about once again and the students are glad to see his familiar face about the campus." Nevertheless, in February, 1901, at age 84, Moses decided to retire. His last act before retiring was to drive Mrs. Peissner, the registrar of the College, from her home to the campus. In an open letter to the Daily Union he wrote, "I have now been obliged to give up on account of my ill health and thank all the citizens in general for their liberal patronage. I used to often hear Dr. Nott tell the college boys that were late to always be punctual, and I have always endeavored to carry out this plan in all my dealings with my customers."

Moses appeared again at Union in 1904 during the ceremony marking the 100th anniversary of Nott's inauguration as president of the College. The 88-year-old stood on a chair to display Nott's hat, the whiffletree of Nott's old three-wheeled carriage, and the pen he used to sign diplomas. Moses declined calls from the crowd for a speech, and Union President Andrew Van Vranken Raymond said, "We must excuse Moses from making a speech; his presence is eloquence enough." Now in the care of his half-sister Leila, then in her mid-40's, Moses would take a daily stroll near his home around Crescent Park, now Veterans Park.

Local newspapers often sketched affectionate portraits of Moses' home life in retirement. "Seated in Dr. Nott's high-backed chair, in his cozy room at his house on Lafayette Street and surrounded by relics of former days," reported the Evening Star, "he spent much of his time content in memories of the past, and in silent communication with the pictures of those near to him grouped about the large portrait of Dr. Nott. Moses used to say that he was never alone while in this room, for the pictures and furniture spoke to him in a language he alone could understand."

Though his health began a serious decline about six months prior to his death, Moses continued his daily walks around Crescent Park for about three more months. He finally passes away on Sunday evening of January 10, 1909, at 11:00 PM, just short of age 92. The Evening Star reported that "his mental faculties were fine until just two days before his death, and he recognized and conversed with visitors in that time." The Daily Union announced "Death Sets Old Slave Free" and that Viney had been a "Friend of Union College Boys in Days

Gone By." His funeral took place that Thursday, January 14th in Vale Cemetery's "Colored Plot". The Concordiensis said of him: "There is no one about whom more memories of by-gone days cling than about this faithful and devoted Negro. It is with sorrow that the Alumni will read of the death of one who has seemed to them to be a part of old Union herself."

Among Schenectady's African-Americans, Moses Viney alone left a detailed personal record that speaks to us today of his ambition, courage and intelligence in the face of the difficult transition from slavery to freedom. The day after his funeral, the Daily Union reported that "some colored friends ordered a floral piece for the coffin that spelled out 'Free'." It was a fitting tribute to the man who nearly 70 years before had set out for Canada, "where all are free".

The author, Neil Yetwin, would like to express his thanks to the following individuals and institutions who provided valuable assistance in the development and completion of this article: Dr. Pat Barbanell, Schenectady City School District; Ellen Fladger of the Special Collections at Schaffer Library, Union College; Wayne Somers of Hammer Mountain Books, Schenectady; Jack Scheffer, Superintendent of Vale Cemetery; Jeff Korman of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, Maryland; the dedicated staffs of the Schenectady County Historical Society, the Schenectady County Clerk's Office, the Schenectady County Surrogate Court, the Office of Vital Records at Schenectady City Hall, the Schenectady County Public Library, the Maryland Historical Society, the Historical Society of Talbot County, Maryland, the Mother Bethel AME Church of Philadelphia, the Free Library of Philadelphia, and my friends and colleagues at Schenectady High School and throughout the Schenectady City School District.

A NOTE ON BLACK HISTORY MONTH

We sent out a plea for material for Black History Month, honoring the fact that Black Schenectady grew up side by side with White Schenectady. The Moses Viney story has been our offering up until now, but we're happy to report that we have received two more items which we will be publishing in ensuing issues of the Newsletter. We're also open to life accounts or anecdotes of the other great groups that have contributed so much to Schenectady's diversity: the Italians, the Polish, the Scottish, the Germans and more recently the Latinos and Afghans. Will Schenectady become a melting pot . . . or a tossed salad?

The most definitive history of Schenectady, surpassing the Nineteenth Century efforts of Jonathan Pearson, is nearing completion. Much of the exhaustive research has been done, using the primary sources in the Gremes Doolittle Library of the Schenectady County Historical Society. Replete with an authoritative narrative, maps and charts, this book promises to be the ultimate work on Schenectady for the foreseeable future.

BUT...

the final stages of completion take time and money. Grants have run low; much meticulous final work needs to be done -- and this costs money: money for transportation; money for duplication of documents money for preparing the index; and money to get the manuscript camera-ready for printing. Here's where you come in.

For a Gift of \$1,000 you become a "Patron of the Humanities." Your name will be included on a special page in the final volume, where you will be listed as a Patron. Checks should be made payable to the Colonial Schenectady Project (a 501 (c)(3) organization), 1127 Avon Road, Schenectady, NY 12308.

Needless to say, gifts in any amount are more than welcome.

FUNDS NEEDED!

Renew your Status

Our extensive art collection is suffering from Deferred Maintenance!

Our beautiful paintings need cleaning, restoring and frame enhancing.

Want to help?

Contributions to this fund are tax deductible and can be made in your name, or in memory of a deceased relative or friend, or even to celebrate and honor the accomplishment of someone you admire.

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WITHOUT YOU WE ARE NOTHING!**

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