



Schenectady County
Historical
Society

Newsletter

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March-April 2013

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THE SCHENECTADY CHOLERA EPIDEMIC OF 1832

by James Strosberg, M.D.



“Plague: An epidemic disease that causes high mortality, especially one regarded as a direct punishment from God.”

-definition from several online dictionaries

Cholera can kill more people more quickly than any other disease. Thousands can die overnight. More people died from cholera in the 100-year period from 1817-1917 than from three centuries of Bubonic Plague (Black Death) during the Middle Ages. The disease is contracted by the ingestion of water and food with fecal contamination by *Vibrio cholerae* bacteria, resulting in acute diarrhea, dehydration, and death. Poor sanitation contributes to its spread.

It must have been frightening for our early 19th century predecessors to read in the weekly *Schenectady Cabinet* about the advance of cholera throughout Europe. They were familiar with yellow fever, typhoid, and smallpox, but what was sure to come was worse! Every week, articles appeared describing its devastation as it spread.

The epidemic started in India in 1817 and had reached Europe by 1831. By June 1832 it arrived in Montreal on an immigrant ship from Ireland carrying 22 people who had died of the disease. On its first visit to North America, this plague traveled from Canada to the south via Lake Champlain and the Hudson River and westward by other paths until reaching Illinois and beyond. Even the mighty Atlantic Ocean could not protect us.

—Continued on pages 4-5

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

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*MABEE FARM EVENTS
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JENNIFER HANSON
OFFICE MANAGER

HOURS

MUSEUM & LIBRARY

Monday-Friday 9-5

Saturday 10-2

and Thursday 5-8

September-JUNE only

MABEE FARM

Tuesday-SATURDAY

10 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Good news! Punxsutawney Phil predicted an early spring! Surely, warm sunny days will follow. Society staff members are busy planning and developing programs, events, workshops, presentations, and exhibits for the upcoming season. Be sure to check out the March/April Calendar entries on the next page. On April 27, we will also be running a bus trip to New York City to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Please see the inserted ad.

Our 2012 fiscal year is nearing its end, so by tradition and the Society's constitution it is time to ask you to help us insure that we muster a quorum for our **Annual Meeting of April 13, 2013** (see page 3). Members, please, whether you are able to attend or not, send e-mail to office@schist.org with "proxy" in the subject line and text that reads: "I hereby authorize the Society's secretary to cast my vote with regard to any matters which may come before the assembly." Or, help the USPS survive by sending surface mail.

We are now in the midst of recruiting additional volunteers for both the Mabee Farm Historic Site and our Museum and Library downtown; see the colorful ad for the "Volunteer College" below. We need help with visitor reception, collections care, library/archival assistance, light facility maintenance, gardening, assisting with our school programs, etc. Staff educator Jenna Peterson is offering us the opportunity to learn more about the Mabee Farm Historic Site and the history that surrounds it. The Volunteer College meets the first and third Saturday of every month at 10:30 a.m. at the George E. Franchere Education Center to educate potential and current volunteers for the Society. Each class will feature a different theme, drawn from the expertise of current volunteers, staff, and area experts. For those interested, please call Jenna at 887-5073.

Last year, a group of Mabee family members and others made substantial donations to the Society to commission a Len Tantillo painting depicting our 300-year old Mabee farmstead.

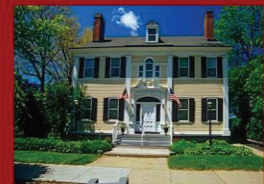
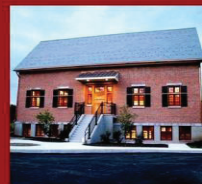
The painting has now been completed, and we are planning a "sneak peek" on April 23 in the Schenectady County Community College's Casola Room, capacity 100. This celebratory event will honor the generous donors and the consummate artist. Len will be with us to describe the process he uses to prepare his historically themed paintings. Cost and other reservation details will reach all members shortly.

The first viewing opportunity for the general public and those who miss the cutoff for the SCCC event will come on May 4 at an exhibit opening and lecture "Building on the Farm, a Legacy of Architecture at the Mabee Farm," where the new painting, appropriately called *Legacy*, will be on public view, destined to be proudly displayed throughout our next 300 years. Keep an eye on NEWS on www.schist.org for details.

Despite all the exuberance, I must close on a sad note. Reenactor and longtime Mabee Farm volunteer William H. "Bill" Frueh died on February 9 at his home in Delmar (see page 7). Oh how Bill would have wished for another summer of marching with his beloved Fife and Drum Corps unit. Our deepest condolences to Bill's children and to his wife Nancy.

-Merritt

SCHS VOLUNTEER COLLEGE



HELP US MAKE HISTORY

1st and 3rd Saturday of Each Month

10:30am at the Mabee Farm Historic Site

Free Tuition to all who volunteer

Exhibits and Programs: at 32 Washington Avenue, Schenectady (HQ) or at the George E. Franchere Education Center (FEC) at the Mabee Farm Historic Site (MF) in Rotterdam Junction

For more information about events at **32 Washington Avenue** or at the **Mabee Farm Historic Site** or its **George E. Franchere Education Center**, please see the Historical Society's website, www.schist.org, or call the Historical Society at **(518) 374-0263** and listen for the Programs option. For more information regarding programs at the Mabee Farm Historic Site or at its George E. Franchere Education Center, call **(518) 887-5073**.

EXHIBITS Exhibits are free for Society members and students, and \$5.00 for non-members

@ 32 Washington Avenue:

(Ongoing) *Medicine on the Mohawk: The Collection of Dr. John M. Spring* – a collection of objects that covers over 200 years of Schenectady medical history.

Ongoing: *Dolls and Desserts* – a collection of different style dolls from the 19th and 20th century, and the story of classic gelatin desserts made before the invention of instant gelatin.

(Now, through April) *The Mohawk Colored Giants* – a baseball team founded in 1913. Over its history, with the help of outstanding play from individuals such as superstar William “Buck” Ewing, the Mohawk Colored Giants became the most successful independent black team in the Eastern New York area. The exhibit is based on Frank Keetz's recently donated collection of memorabilia.

@ the Mabee Farm's FEC

February 2nd – March 15th *Inspiration from the Past: The Art of James Whitbeck* – Take a trip back in time and view artwork inspired by the Dutch masters of the 16th and 17th century. He used the same oil painting techniques that were used in The Netherlands and generated the same detailed realistic feeling.

March 30th – opening of a new exhibit: *Building on the Farm: A Legacy of Architecture at the Mabee Farm* – From the stone house to the inn, from the brick house to the barn, the Mabee Farm is home to a number of interesting architectural gems. The exhibit focuses on the unique architectural aspects of the current buildings on site and tells the story of how they evolved.

PROGRAMS all Programs are free for Society members and students and \$5.00 for non-members.

Saturday, March 9 at 2:00 PM

Charles Proteus Steinmetz

Speaker: Frank Taormina

Charles Steinmetz was, perhaps, Schenectady's most interesting citizen at the turn of the 20th century. He was an outstanding scientist and engineer whose work led to the development of alternating electrical current, enabling the expansion of the electric power industry in the United States. His discovery of the law of hysteresis led to better electric motors for industrial use. He was also very active in community affairs through his service on the Schenectady Board of Education and as a member of the City Council.

Location: 32 Washington Avenue

Saturday, April 13

Annual Membership Meeting

Refreshments at 1:30, Business Meeting at 2:00, Program at 2:15

Of Different Worlds: American Indian-Dutch Experiences in the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys

Speaker: Dr. William Starna

Henry Hudson's trip north up the river that today bears his name took place in the same year that Samuel De Champlain made his brief and violent foray south into the Champlain Valley. But it was with the Dutch, not the French, that Indians would experience their first sustained contact with European interlopers in an area that would be called New Netherland and later colonial New York. Based on surviving Dutch documentary records that have been painstakingly translated, our speaker will address early cross-cultural appraisals and disputes over land and the fur trade..

Location: 32 Washington Avenue

Tuesday, April 23

Unveiling of the new Leonard Tantillo painting of the Mabee Farm. See President's Letter on page 2.

STROSBERG - continued from page 1.

Over the course of the epidemic, 150,000 of 13 million Americans would perish, about one in every 80 residents. New York City suffered a similar ratio, 3,315 deaths out of a population of 250,000, mostly in the poor and unsanitary neighborhoods where the African-Americans and Irish-Catholic immigrants lived. Albany's loss was even higher, 422 deaths out of about 25,000 residents, about one in every 60.

The exact death toll in Schenectady is unknown. Some authors suggest a loss ratio comparable to that of Albany, but weekly newspaper death notices reported only 50 deaths out of 8,000 residents, one in 160. If so, why did Schenectady have such a lower death rate than Albany or New York? What were the responses from the public, or more specifically, from our clergy and medical professionals?

The clergy opined that cholera was the punishment of Divine Judgment for the sins of wickedness, depravity, and alcoholism. Most victims lived in poverty, and the majority of cases were found in the non-Christian world. New York's Protestant leaders interpreted the 1832 cholera epidemic as proof of God's displeasure with contemporary morality. An editorial in the *Western Sunday School Messenger* declared:

"Drunkards and filthy, wicked people of all descriptions are swept away in *heaps*, as if the Holy God could no longer bear their wickedness... The Cholera is not caused by intemperance and filth ... it is a *scourge*, a rod in the hand of God."

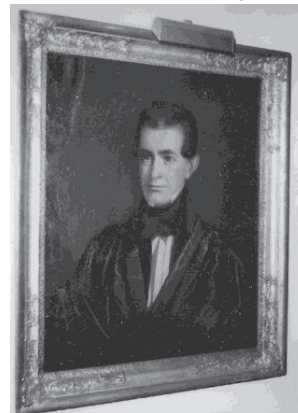
There certainly was evidence for the theory that intemperance was a factor. In Albany, all but two of the 422 dead were members of one of the city's 14 temperance societies with a collective membership of 4,164. In 1825 the average American adult consumed seven gallons of alcohol, mostly whiskey and hard liquor. By the late 1840s consumption had fallen to 1.7 gallons per year per person due to the temperance movement and possibly the effects of the cholera epidemic.

The Dutch Reformed Church Synod meeting on June 20 in New York City, along with other Protestant sects, called on Democratic President Andrew Jackson to proclaim an Official Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer. This message was delivered to him in person by New Yorker John Schermerhorn, an acquaintance. The President, although a religious man whose bible is still resting on his nightstand in *The Hermitage* near Nashville, cited separation of Church and State and said that prayer and fasting was a matter for clergy, not government.

Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, a Whig and a rival of Jackson, failed in his attempt to get Congress to proclaim an official day. New York Governor Enos Throop (1784-1874), a Progressive from Johnstown, likewise refused. Under his guidance New York State opened its first insane asylum and ended imprisonment for debtors. He led the fight against the cholera epidemic. But most other state governors did proclaim specific days of prayer.

Our own City Fathers faced the cholera head on. The Schenectady City Council passed an ordinance requiring every housekeeper and physician to report all cases to the Board of Health via the Mayor's office every day. A Cholera Hospital was established on the outskirts of the city and physicians were engaged to treat the poor at public expense. Dr. John Tonnelier, City Physician, intercepted canal boats passing through our city and prohibited them from docking if any crew member showed signs of cholera.

The Board also recommended that Chloride of Lime, available at drug stores, be applied to outhouses and cisterns. During the epidemic, Union College Professor Chester Averill published a paper suggesting that lime be added to the drinking water, but his advice was ignored.



Chester Averill (1804-1837).

The Board of Health may have been overly optimistic, saying that "relying upon a merciful Providence and making use of all the means in our power, we think there is no cause for alarm." Even after the first death occurred here on July 12, a canal boat captain who came down with diarrhea in Albany and died seven hours after he arrived in Schenectady, there was no alarm.

And then the cholera struck full force and every physician available was put to work. Dr. Daniel Toll, the Founding Vice President of the Schenectady County Medical Society in 1810, came out of retirement to help. When Union College student Alexander Vedder, later a very prominent surgeon and mayor of Schenectady, volunteered, he contracted cholera himself but survived.

Troy may have been less affected by the cholera outbreak, possibly because that city quarantined 180 immigrants on Green Island. But Albany had it bad. Half the population was in mourning and most of the stores closed. Farmers were afraid to come in to sell their produce. Food became scarce.

Some of the Schenectady patients' medical records have been preserved at the Efner Historical Center in City

Hall (where Society Secretary Cynthia Seacord is Archivist.) Dr. Daniel McDougall submitted his bill for the 150 patients he treated between August 1 and September 17. These included: *“Irishman at stone quarry, Cuff Vedder’s family, Betty (a black woman) , Nathaniel Lucas (a canal boy), Mathias (a German), Tom Vedder’s spouse (a white wench), Widow Wilson’s child, Old Widow Plato, Wench at John Andersen’s, Jacob Van Vranken and Squaw, Susan Schermerhorn, Maria Schermerhorn (poor house), Major Snell’s son, and Phoebe Glen’s grandchild.”*

The “wenches” and “canal boy” referred to indentured servants. Although black slavery ended in New York State on July 4, 1829, “an act concerning apprentices and servants” had been passed by the legislature in 1801. The records indicated that there were many different drugs prescribed including opium, belladonna, and sodium bicarbonate.

Although cholera was thought to be a disease of the lower class, there were exceptions. On July 30, the *Schenectady Cabinet* reported that *“Mrs. Magoffin (mother of Dr. James C. Magoffin of Schenectady), a highly respected female from Brooklyn, arrived Thursday, got sick Friday, and died Saturday.”*

And what was the response of our citizenry to the coming plague? Union College promptly cancelled its commencement and sent its students home. As in previous epidemics, the affluent fled the cities. In New York, about a quarter of the population left. According to his diary, Judge Samuel Jones moved his family from



James Chatham Duane

Schenectady to Duanesburgh until the crisis was over. His wife was the former Maria Duane, the daughter of Union College graduate James Chatham Duane (1824-1897), an 1844 Union College graduate born in Schenectady who served as Chief Engineer of the Army of the Potomac during the Civil War.

The epidemic ended in early September with a cold wave. Cholera bacteria cannot survive below 51 degrees Fahrenheit. The Board of Health, ever optimistic, declared that not a single new case of cholera had occurred in the last ten days.

Asiatic Cholera returned to Schenectady in 1849 with 12 cases but only four deaths. President Zachary Taylor proclaimed a national day of fasting and prayer, but it did

not help. When his train passed through Schenectady on September 6 he was so sick with cholera that he could not make a public appearance.

Following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, cholera broke out, resulting in a half million cases and 7,000 deaths. In 2011 the New York City Health Department confirmed cholera in three New Yorkers who had attended a wedding in the Dominican Republic, which shares the Island of Hispaniola with Haiti.

A missed opportunity to discover the epidemiology of cholera occurred with the detailed study of the epidemic by the Union College Class of 1817. Lewis Caleb Beck (1798-1853) was commissioned by Governor Throop to go to Candada and find out what he could. Dr. Beck clearly demonstrated a spatial-temporal correlation of cholera, just as Dr. John Snow would observe in England 20 years later. Dr. Snow, who performed anesthesia and was familiar with the physical properties of gases, was able to ignore the currently accepted theory that miasmas were causes of disease, and instead correctly interpreted his findings as a water-borne infection. When he removed the handle on the Broad Street water pump in Soho in London, cholera in that neighborhood promptly ceased.



The infamous Soho pump in West London



Lewis Caleb Beck

Dr. Beck, bereft of that future knowledge, could not conceive of humans acquiring an infection from a common source of contamination. Despite missing the boat on the cholera epidemic, he became one of the outstanding American scientists of the 19th Century. New York Governor William Learned Marcy (1786-1857) appointed him *Mineralogist of the State of New York* and his collection of 3,000 minerals is the basis of the mineral collection of the New York State Museum in Albany, NY.

New Materials in the Library

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

Albany's Historic Street by John Papp, gift of **Lorraine Deere**

The Apprentice System of the Schenectady Works by General Electric Company, gift of **Carol Lewis**

Celebrating Johnstown by Bill Ackerbauer, gift of **Carol Lewis**

Defending the Hudson in the American Revolution by Lincoln Diamant and George S. Gardner, gift of **Carol Lewis**

Early Brick, Niskayuna Area by Howard Becker, gift of **Carol Lewis**

Fire! Fire! by John Papp, gift of **Lorraine Deere**

Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America by Eric Jay Dolin, gift of **Carol Lewis**

Ghosts of the Northeast by David J. Pitkin, gift of **Carol Lewis**

A Guide to Dutch Manuscripts Relating to New Netherland in United States Repositories by Charles Gehring

Haunted Hudson Valley by Cheri Farnsworth, gift of **Carol Lewis**

The Horseless Carriage by John Papp, gift of **Lorraine Deere**

The Hudson: A History by Tom Lewis, gift of **Carol Lewis**

The Last Canvas by Marcia Saunders Buffett, gift of **Carol Lewis**

Maggie: Millhand and Farmer by Margaret Sheridan Harrigan, gift of **Carol Lewis**

Nevin by Hugh Nevin, gift of **Hugh and Vaughn Nevin**

New York State Trivia by Michael Mendrick, gift of **Carol Lewis**

North Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom by Milton C. Sernett, gift of **Carol Lewis**

Roads to Niagara, Roads to Oriskany and Roads to Saratoga, trilogy by Gil Herkimer, gifts of **Carol Lewis**

Schenectady: A Pictorial History by Larry Hart, gift of **Col. William Yates**

Shadow Soldiers of the American Revolution: Loyalist Tales from New York to Canada by Mark Jodoin, gift of **Carol Lewis**

Smoke 'N Rails by John Papp, gift of **Lorraine Deere**
Those Golden Years ... The Circus by John Papp, gift of **Lorraine Deere**

A Time of Terror: The Story of Colonel Jacob Klock's Regiment And The People They Protected, 1774-1783 by AJ Berry, gift of **Carol Lewis**

Visions of New York State: The Historical Paintings of L.F. Tantillo, gift of **Carol Lewis**

War and Redemption: A Civil War Tale by David Cleutz, gift of **Carol Lewis**

Wind of Death: A Novel by Don E. Phelps, gift of **Carol Lewis**

HISTORIC DOCUMENTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Union College 1989 alumni directory, gift of **Jeremy Allen**

General Electric publications and photographs of Central Park, gift of **Lorraine Deere**



Dates for spring field trips are filling up fast, so book your field trip to the Mabee Farm Historic Site today by calling (518) 887-5037 or emailing educator@schist.org

Tax-Free IRA Rollover Extended!

As part of the American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012, individuals aged 70 ½ or older may make tax-free transfers up to \$100,000 from an IRA to the Schenectady County Historical Society for 2013. Although such contributions had to be completed by January 31st, 2013 for the 2012 tax year, gifts for the 2013 tax year may and must be completed no later than December 31st of this year. Such transfers would fulfill some or all of your required minimum annual distribution **without increasing taxable income**, unlike distributions made directly to yourself. For more information and sample letters for your IRA custodian and the IRS, please call the Society at (518) 374-0263, option 5, and ask for Donor Relations.

Around the Society



*Freedom Exhibit Opening – FEC
Councilwoman Marion Porterfield & Marsha Mortimer*



*Freedom Exhibit Opening – FEC
Ralph & Catherine Boyd*



*Whitbeck Art Exhibit – FEC
James Whitbeck & Ryan Mahoney*



Photos: Pat Barrot, Deb Crosby



James Whitbeck & Louise Basa



*Mabee Farm Volunteer
Bill Frueh 1943-2013*



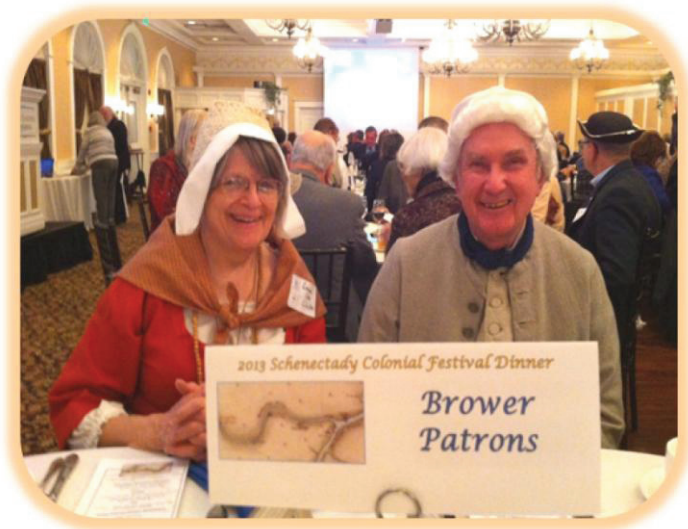
*Red Hat Society ladies enjoy a day at the
Franchere Education Center.*



*First wedding at the Franchere Center
Chris Northrup and John Osinski 1/26/13*

Schenectady County Historical Society

SCCC Community Archaeology Program Colonial Festival Dinner



Laura Linder & Dr. Ron Kingsley, SCCC



L-R: Councilwoman Peggy King, Laura Linder, Schenectady Mayor Gary McCarthy, Bill Buell

Photos by Jennifer Hanson

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