



Schenectady County  
Historical  
Society

# Newsletter

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32 Washington Avenue, Schenectady, New York 12305

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## *"The Native Flavor of American Sharpness:" The Radical Life and Tragic Decline of Warren Starr Van Valkenburgh*

*By Melissa Tacke*

Schenectady's association with radical politics in the first quarter of the twentieth century is perhaps most associated with George Lunn, Schenectady's first and only Socialist mayor and editor of the local Socialist weekly newspaper, *The Citizen*. Another of Schenectady's radicals of the period, Warren Starr Van Valkenburgh, is much less well known. A Socialist-turned-anarchist, critic of Lunn, and friend of the famous anarchist Emma Goldman, Van Valkenburgh experienced his political awakening in Schenectady and brought his perspective about local events to a broader audience through articles in Goldman's magazine, *Mother Earth*. After relocating to the New York City area, Van Valkenburgh achieved some prominence as the editor of *Road to Freedom*, the most prominent anarchist periodical of the 1920s. However, the last ten years of Van Valkenburgh's life were a struggle, marred by spotty employment and heavy drinking. This article serves as but a scant sketch of the life of a man whose personal history intersected with the history of Schenectady for about a decade.

Continued on pages 4 and 5.

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## 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.

## Letter from the President

Fall is upon us, and elections and holidays are forthcoming. At the Mabee Farm, the fall school program is coming to a close. The pumpkins, gourds, and Indian corn have been harvested and Badger and Goat Girl soon will be off to their winter vacation home. Election fervor will continue when David Pietrusza comes to Society headquarters on November 11<sup>th</sup> at 3 PM to review the Election of 1960. And then, on November 17<sup>th</sup>, Frank Taormina will discuss the Presidency of Chester A. Arthur.

Artist and historian Len Tantillo will return to the George E. Franchere Education Center (FEC) on November 10<sup>th</sup> for a presentation and signing of his book, *The Edge of New Netherland*. There will be a Holiday Fair at the FEC on November 17<sup>th</sup>, followed by the November 24<sup>th</sup> opening of the sixth annual *Festival of Trees* downtown, sponsored by the Society and the YWCA. The Festival will run until December 9<sup>th</sup>. On December 8<sup>th</sup> at the Franchere Center, well-known cartoonist and author Bob Eckstein will present *The History of the Snowman*. This cool event is not to be missed!

The Society facilities at the Franchere Center are available for rental during the year for individuals and groups looking for somewhere to host a meeting, conference, wedding reception, reunion, corporate meeting, or party, either indoors, or in the picnic pavilion in the warm months. The rental scale for our facilities may be viewed by scrolling down after selecting the link to the Franchere Center at [www.mabeefarm.org](http://www.mabeefarm.org). For further information, call Events Manager Pat Barrot at the Mabee Farm at (518) 887-5073.

I am pleased to report that Jenna Peterson joined us in mid-August as Assistant Curator-Educator and has been busy ever since. As a recent graduate of the SUNY Cooperstown Graduate program, she holds a Master's degree in Museum Science. While at Cooperstown she had extensive involvement with assisting and implementing educational activities at the Farmers' Museum. Currently she is deeply involved in reviewing and participating in the Mabee Farm Fall School program and helping with website maintenance. During the late fall and early winter months, she will be involved in Mabee Farm collections management. Her smiling face and interesting profile follow this Letter. Sending a warm email greeting of welcome to her at [educator@schist.org](mailto:educator@schist.org) would be a nice thing to do.

In closing on the bright sunny day on which I write—Come Visit! And Happy, Happy Holidays to All!

*-Merritt*



Jenna E. Peterson

Jenna Peterson was born and raised in a suburb of Des Moines, Iowa. She broke the family Iowa State tradition by attending Wartburg College, and after vacations and years of camps at a variety of museums, began working at Living History Farms. In 2009 she graduated with degrees in History, French, and International Relations, and a desire to pursue a career in museums. She made the first of many long drives between Iowa and New York to attend the Cooperstown Graduate Program. Jenna graduated this spring after completing internships at Mystic Seaport, Plimoth Plantation, and The Farmers' Museum. Her thesis focused on the *Let's Move! Museums and Gardens Program* and how museums can encourage healthy lifestyles. She enjoys reading, traveling, and finding sneaky ways to feed vegetables to her boyfriend.

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

For more information about all the events at **32 Washington Avenue**, or at the **George E. Franchere Education Center (FEC)** at the **Mabee Farm Historic Site**, please check [www.schenectadyhistory.net](http://www.schenectadyhistory.net) or call the Society at **(518) 374-0263** and listen for the option describing Programs. Call **(518) 887-5073** for programs at the Farm at its FEC.

***EXHIBITS***

**@ 32 Washington Avenue: Opening in November:**  
***Medicine on the Mohawk: The Collection of Dr. John M. Spring*** Explore the history of the medical field through this 3-dimensional collection of objects that cover over 200 years of Schenectady medical history.

***6<sup>th</sup> Annual Festival of Trees***

Saturday, **November 24, through Sunday, December 9**  
**Hours:** Monday – Friday 10 AM – 4 PM; Saturdays 10 AM – 4PM; Sundays Noon – 4PM

**Admission:** \$5 for adults; \$2 for children 6-12; children 5 years old and under admitted free of charge.

This Festival of Trees is a cooperative venture between the Society and the YWCA next door. Trees will be on display at both locations. Purchase of a ticket entitles admission to both venues. See ad on page 8.

**@ The FEC at 1100 Main Street (Route 5S):**  
**Currently on display: *Hurricane Irene: One Year Later*** – photo exhibit post the August 2011 storm

**Opening December 28**

***Free at Last: A History of the Abolition of Slavery in America***- this exhibit explores how slavery in America developed into an institution, and how it came to be condemned as it divided the nation during the Civil War. There is an early fragment of Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" speech, letters by abolitionists and slaves, and personal letters from soldiers who fought in the Civil War. There are also photographs, broadsides and other images.

**Opening December 2012**

***Views of the Farm*** – This photo exhibit is a showcase of the many different aspects of the Mabee Farm. Some views will be familiar while others will illustrate items in magnificent detail. All photographs are the work of local photographers.

***Programs*** All programs are free for members and \$5.00 for non-members unless otherwise indicated

**Saturday, November 3 at 2:00 PM**

***Life of Clarissa Putman***

**Speaker:** Peter Betz, Fulton County Historian  
Clarissa Putman, the jilted lover of Sir John Johnson, has

been the subject of much Mohawk Valley mythology over the years. Fulton County Historian Peter Betz will separate fact from fiction in examining her life.

**Location:** 32 Washington Avenue

**Sunday, November 4 at 1:00 PM**

***Tomorrow's Houses: New England Modernism***

**Speaker:** photographer Geoffrey Gross will discuss his latest book, a richly illustrated presentation of some of the best modernist architecture in New England, built during the early to mid 20th century by such masters as Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, and others.

**Location:** Franchere Center, Mabee Farm Historic Site

**Saturday, November 10 at 1:00 PM**

***The Edge of New Netherland***

**Len Tantillo**, artist and historian, will discuss and sign his latest book which deals with the local area.

**Location:** Franchere Center, Mabee Farm Historic Site

**Sunday, November 11 at 3:00 PM**

***1960: LBJ vs. JFK vs. Nixon: The Epic Campaign that Forged Three Presidencies***

**David Pietrusza**, author – he will discuss and sign his book about these three imperfect, all-too-human giants as they scrambled, schemed, and clawed their way through their campaigns for the presidency.

**Location:** 32 Washington Avenue

**Saturday, November 17 at 2:00 PM**

***Chester A. Arthur***

**Speaker:** Local historian Frank Taormina will discuss the Union College graduate who, upon the assassination of James A. Garfield, became the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. **Location:** 32 Washington Avenue

Also on **November 17: Holiday Fair at the Mabee Farm; 9:00 AM – 4:00 PM.** See ad on page 8.

**Saturday, December 8 at 2:00 PM**

***History of the Snowman***

**Speaker:** Bob Eckstein is an award winning illustrator, humorist and writer whose work has appeared *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Reader's Digest* among other publications. The snowman appears everywhere on practically everything. He will discuss the history of the snowman through word and illustrations.

**Location:** Franchere Center, Mabee Farm Historic Site

### Van Valkenburgh—continued from p1

Warren Starr Van Valkenburgh was born in 1884 in Albany. Sometime in his early working life, he lost one of his legs, reportedly from a railroad accident. Van Valkenburgh first appears in the 1909 city directory, living at 10 Duane Avenue and working for General Electric as a bookkeeper. By 1914 he and his wife had moved to Scotia, where the couple and their two children would live until the family relocated to Staten Island around 1918.

The 1910s were a dynamic time in Schenectady. Between 1900 and 1920, the city's population nearly tripled, as workers flocked to Schenectady to work at G.E. and the American Locomotive Company. The voices of reformers, suffragists, labor organizers, and Socialists were growing in volume and in number throughout the decade. Van Valkenburgh became involved with the Socialist Party soon after moving to the city. On September 19, 1912, he wrote a letter officially resigning from the party in favor of anarchism. He served as secretary of the Economic Club (soon renamed the Sociology Club), a group organized to study and debate social problems, from 1914 to 1918. One of his associates in the Sociology Club, Shankar Gokhale, was also active with Van Valkenburgh in co-founding the Schenectady Free Thought Society, an organization formed for the study and discussion of religious thought, in 1915.

Although Van Valkenburgh was somewhat politically active locally, his connections outside of Schenectady proved to be of more consequence in his life. Around 1912, he began corresponding with Emma Goldman, the anarchist orator who was branded "the most hated woman in America" after being accused of complicity in the assassination of President McKinley in 1901. Van Valkenburgh would become one of Goldman's lifelong friends and correspondents and, in later years, helped to raise funds to support her financially while she wrote her memoirs. He also organized three speaking engagements for her in Schenectady in the early part of 1915.

Goldman's local lectures provided a focus for Van Valkenburgh's criticisms of Mayor George Lunn in what would be his first article for *Mother Earth*. In addition to anarchist luminaries such as Peter Kropotkin and Lucy Parsons, *Mother Earth* featured articles by Margaret Sanger, Leo Tolstoy, Margaret Anderson, and Helen Keller, and featured cover art by Man Ray and Robert Minor. Its subscribers numbered about 10,000. Van

Valkenburgh's article, "Schenectady Socialism," appeared in the May 1915 issue. In it, he charged that *The Citizen's* refusal to accept a paid advertisement for one of Goldman's lectures, the paper's insinuation that Goldman's lectures were organized by the Democrats, and Lunn's refusal to debate

Goldman on the grounds

that "debates settle nothing" -- while he

engaged in a series

of debates with

other politicians

-- amounted to

hypocrisy on

Lunn's part.

"There was a

time when I

believed Dr.

Lunn was a

sincere man," he

wrote. "Now I know

he is an unscrupulous

charlatan...As a politician

he can operate the steam roller

with the dexterity of Elihu Root ... If he believes in a

free press, as he says he does, it is in the other fellow's

paper, not his own. It would be a treat to hear him wax

warm in his verbosity if only he could be induced to take

as his theme some Sunday night, 'Why I preach one

thing and practice another.'" Van Valkenburgh closed by

stating his hope that Schenectadians would soon realize

that the city was the victim of "too much Socialist

politics and too little social conscience."

Another of Van Valkenburgh's articles, in the

November 1915 issue of *Mother Earth*, discussed a

recent strike at General Electric for an eight-hour

workday. By the evening of the second day of the strike,

12,000 workers were participating. "The most illustrious

feature, aside from the unity of the strikers, was the total

absence of violence," wrote Van Valkenburgh. "The

parade of more than twelve thousand men, women and

girls, peacefully walking into a struck factory for their

pay without a policeman in sight was a wonderfully

majestic spectacle." The latter half of the article stressed

the importance of including office workers in the future

of labor organizing, a view perhaps influenced by Van

Valkenburgh's own position as a bookkeeper. In the end,

the workers returned to their jobs after five weeks, not



Emma Goldman 1911



having won their demands. Despite this loss, Van Valkenburgh stated that the result of the strike should not discourage the workers, citing their courage in taking on G.E. as “ample proof that they will not long remain in servitude without protest.” Alongside this championing of the striking workers, Van



**George Lunn 1912**

Valkenburgh could not resist taking some digs at Lunn, implying that the support voiced for the strike in the pages of *The Citizen* was a cynical ploy to secure votes for Lunn that fall: “for his paper to do anything else,” he wrote, “would eventuate in political suicide, and the crafty Dr. Lunn has no such good intentions.”

Aside from the articles written with a local focus, Van Valkenburgh wrote many other short pieces on a variety of topics during his time in Schenectady, including militarism, the execution of labor activist Joseph Hillstrom, and a championing of the birth control movement as led by Margaret Sanger. In addition to writing articles for *Mother Earth*, he also contributed to *The Blast*, edited by Alexander Berkman, *Revolt* and *Road to Freedom*, both edited by Hippolyte Havel, and *Instead of a Magazine*, edited by Herman Kuehn.

Around 1918, Van Valkenburgh moved to the New York City area, where he would live for the remainder of his life. He was hired to work in advertising for the Elliott-Fisher Company, a manufacturer of typewriters. In 1927 he was fired from his position following his active and public involvement on behalf of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two Italian immigrant anarchists accused of murder in one of America’s most notorious trials. Van Valkenburgh’s statements about the case made the New York papers, and he was convinced that this was the reason for his termination. Following his dismissal, he found it very difficult to find lasting employment and was convinced that he had been black-listed. In late 1934, he wrote to anarchist printer Joseph

Ishill: “Since that fateful year [1927] I have held about six jobs at different times, from each of which I was removed either because of some indiscretion [sic] regarding my opinions ... or because of some reason which the boss was ‘not at liberty to divulge.’ That infamous blacklist... does, in fact, exist ... In the last seven years, I have possibly worked three.” He had tried to salvage his professional career by assuming a pseudonym, Walter Starrett, for his political writing and activity after he was fired.

Van Valkenburgh’s compatriots in New York City remembered him as a fiery speaker with a sharp tongue. Jack Frager recalled him as “an acid critic of his opponents [who] refused to show tact or pull punches.” Franz Fleigler characterized Van Valkenburgh as having “the native flavor of American sharpness and a good manner of talking and making sense at the same time.” Louis Slater recalled him being knocked off of the speaker’s platform in Union Square by his Communist opponents. A 1931 *New York Times* article describes a rally where Van Valkenburgh drew boos for comparing the United States favorably to the Soviet Union, saying that politicians “are all alike, whether in New York, Centralia, or Moscow, and you can’t hold a protest meeting in Moscow, but in capitalist America you can at least speak.” When booed, he retorted, “The truth hurts, doesn’t it?” and characterized those heckling him as “the children of Jesuits in Moscow.”

Along with his speeches, Van Valkenburgh’s friends in New York also remembered his heavy drinking following his dismissal from Elliott-Fisher. “He drank very heavily,” Sarah Taback remembered. “One day while walking to a meeting I saw him lying in the gutter on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, drunk and dirty and mumbling to himself.” Arnold Leonard Ross recalled that Van Valkenburgh “never got over” his firing. “He took to drink, fell heavily into debt, and finally separated from his wife.” After *Road to Freedom* ceased publication in 1932, Van Valkenburgh became less prominent in anarchist circles, although during the last years of his life he remained active, bringing speakers to New York City and editing the periodical *Spanish Revolution* in support of the anarchists during the Spanish Civil War. He died on May 22, 1938, at the age of 53. Following his death, *Challenge: A Libertarian Weekly* remembered him as “a man who willingly gave up position, career and personal security out of devotion to an Ideal.”

## *New Materials in the Library*

### BOOKS

*Beautiful Places in the City of Schenectady* by Susan Rosenthal  
*Cast with Style: Nineteenth Century Cast-Iron Stoves from the Albany Area* by Tammis Kane Groft  
*Clement Family: A History and Genealogy* by Merton Dillon and *Clement Family Database*, gift of **Mary Ellen Van Camp**  
*Dear Yeats, Dear Pound, Dear Ford: Jeanne Robert Foster and Her Circle of Friends* by Richard and Janis Londraville  
*Dutch Colonists in the Americas, 1615-1815* by David Dobson  
*Dutch New York: The Roots of Hudson Valley Culture* by Roger Panetta  
*Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1923-60* by Ronald W. Schatz  
*Ferry Road Over the Mohawk River Back Channel: An Historic American Engineering Record, Level II Documentation*, gift of **New York State Museum Cultural Resource Survey Program**  
*A Field Guide to American Houses* by Virginia McAlester, et al.  
*Fourth Supplement to Descendants of Albert and Arent Andriessen Bradt* by Laurene Matthews Grimes, gift of **Charles Case Stoodley and Carolyn Van Patten**  
*From the Historian's Desk* by Alice Begley  
*Genealogical Encyclopedia of the Colonial Americas* by Christina K. Schaefer  
*Henry W. Darling and His Family: Treasured Images* by Patty Hoenigman, gift of **Patty Darling Hoenigman and Nelson Darling**  
*House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home* by Sally Light  
*Leavitt Family and Allied Families*, gift of **Joan Spicer**  
*New Netherland Roots* by Gwenn F. Epperson  
*The Other Daughters of the Revolution: The Narrative of K. White (1809) and the Memoirs of Elizabeth Fisher (1810)*, edited by Sharon Halevi  
*The Other New York: The American Revolution beyond New York City, 1763-1787*, ed. by Tiedemann and Fingerhut  
*Stories from the Mohawk Valley: The Painted Rocks, the Good Benedict Arnold & More* by Bob Cudmore  
*Swarts, Teitsoorts, and Whittakers*, gift of **Betty Harrell Gerlack**  
*To Do Justice to Him & Myself: Evert Wendell's Account Book of the Fur Trade with Indians in Albany, NY, 1695-1726*, ed. by Kees Jan Waterman

### HISTORIC DOCUMENTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Digital copy of *Pictorial Map of Schenectady, N.Y. and Union College* (1931), gift of **Joan and Hans Schindler**  
50th Class Reunion information - Mont Pleasant High School class of January/June 1944; 50th Class Reunion information - Mont Pleasant High School class of June 1943; Press information (photos, programs, releases, etc.) for dedication of G.E. Research Laboratory at the Knolls (1950), gift of **Lorraine Deere**

### YEARBOOKS

St. Columba's High School (1944), gift of **Diane Boehne**  
Vocational High School (1939, 1940, 1942, 1943); Van Corlaer Junior High School (Jan. 1941); Central Park School (1937), gift of **Lorraine Deere**

**FINDING AIDS** for the following collections have been added to [www.schenectadyhistory.net/library/collections](http://www.schenectadyhistory.net/library/collections):  
Wadsworth S. Kokernak Photograph Collection; Ettore Mancuso Collection; Education documents (from historic manuscripts collection)

## *Help make our wishes come true!*

The Library has recently created a Wish List for books, office supplies, and other items through the website [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). To make a donation to the Library using our Wish List, follow these simple steps:

Visit [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). At the top right of the home page, move your mouse over "Wish List" and choose "Find a Wish List or Registry." At the top right of the screen, select Wish Lists. In the search box, type **Schenectady County Historical Society**. Items on our wish list will be shown with those wished for most recently at the top. You can sort the list by title, category, or price. Once you've found an item you'd like to purchase for the Library, click on the yellow button next to the item and follow the instructions for ordering. You can choose to have the item sent directly to our library.

The last, and most important, step is to let us know of your gift so that we can thank you with an acknowledgement in our Newsletter. Please email Librarian Melissa Tacke at [librarian@schist.org](mailto:librarian@schist.org) with the subject line "Wish List Gift" that includes your name, address, the item you purchased, and any other information about your donation (i.e. "in memory of"). We cannot thank you without this final step! If you have any questions, please contact Melissa at 518-374-0263, option 3.



# *Around the Society*

## *War of 1812 Muster at the Mabee Farm*



## *Farm & Foliage Day at the Mabee Farm*



*Photos by Ann Aronson*



# Schenectady County Historical Society



**Mabee Farm Historic Site's**  
***Holiday Fair***  
**Saturday, Nov 17 ~ 9 am - 4 pm**

*Find that extra special gift created by  
local artists & craftspeople just in time  
for the holidays ~ baskets, fine art,  
jewelry, primitive folk art, candles,  
photography, handknits, wood &  
more!*

**Mabee Farm Historic Site**  
1100 Main St., Rotterdam Jct.  
[www.mabeefarm.org](http://www.mabeefarm.org)  
(518) 887-5073



**6th Annual  
Festival of Trees**  
**November 24-December 9**

Schenectady Historical Society  
32 Washington Ave.

YWCA  
44 Washington Ave.

Schenectady, New York 12305

Monday-Saturday 10 am - 4 pm  
Sunday noon - 4 pm

**\$5 Adults  
\$2 Children  
Children 5 and under free**

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