



Schenectady County
Historical
Society

Newsletter

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September-October, 2013

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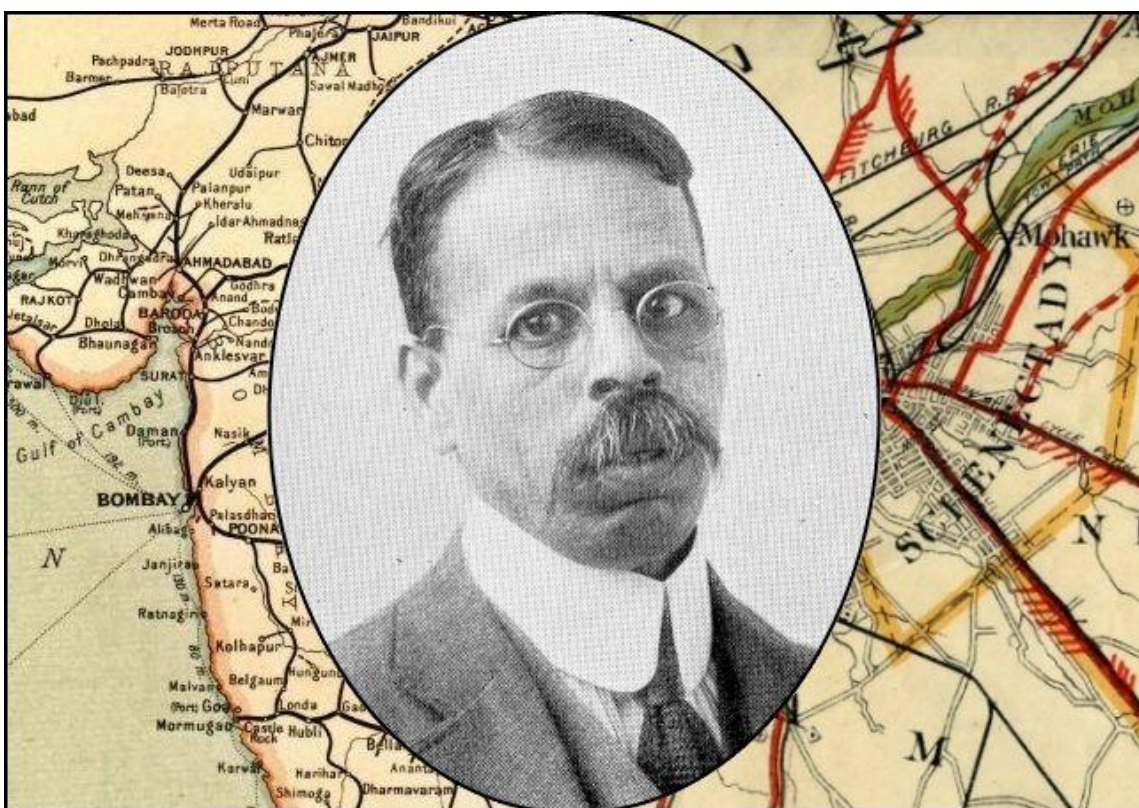
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Shankar Laxman Gokhale

Shifting Definitions of Race and Citizenship: The Case of Shankar Gokhale

by Melissa Tacke

“I am neither an American citizen nor a British subject, but a man without a country, an outlaw of the world, having been punished in this way for my unpardonable crime of pledging my allegiance to the only flag which at one time had offered to treat me as a ‘free white person.’ But . . . the Supreme Court of the United States, the Bureau of Naturalization, and the Department of State decided otherwise.”

—Shankar Gokhale, speaking to Schenectady’s Hindustan Club in 1926 about his citizenship fight

continued on pages 4-5

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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

HISTORIC PRESERVATION VS. “PROGRESS”

During the past year, the news media have been reporting on the closure or demise of urban churches and the attendant struggles between and among local governments, developers, and neighborhood residents. The City of Steeples—Charleston, South Carolina—presently has eleven vacant churches. City officials there are trying to find buyers in order to prevent demolition, replacement, or decay. The city has long maintained building height restrictions in order to maintain its fabled church steeple view shed.

Locally, Albany recently saw an effort to buy St Joseph’s Church for development as a brewery blocked by neighborhood residents. In Watervliet, there was an intense struggle to prevent demolition of the magnificent St Patrick’s Church and its replacement with a supermarket. Sadly, the church fell to the wrecking ball. In Troy, several college fraternities are in the process of buying empty churches for rehab into fraternity houses. There is both opposition and support within the neighborhoods.

In New York City, St. Brigid’s, a lower eastside church parish created in the 1840s to serve Irish Famine Immigrants, had been targeted for the demolition ball. At the very last minute an anonymous donor stepped in to save the facility. It has been rehabbed and recently rededicated as a vibrant new Roman Catholic Parish.

There have been some local success stories. Early this year the Schenectady *Daily Gazette* reported on the successful efforts of a developer to create innovative office space in the previously closed German Methodist Church. The Schenectady Light Opera Company was successful in obtaining the buildings of the closed Saint John the Baptist Catholic parish. We hope that local governments, city planners, developers, and citizens can work together to save and repurpose other grand and glorious structures as they become available.

Look around you. Visit the Stockade, the GE plot, the Mabee Farm Historic Site. Revisit some of those historic houses and sites in our area for they may be gone in years to come because of natural disaster or the pressures of development. Pick up a copy of the Stockade smart phone tour. There is also one for Erie Canal sites in the City. The Stockade Art Show is on Saturday, September 7th, and the Walkabout will be held on Saturday September 28th. (See ad on page 8.) Enjoy the many fine weather days of summer remaining.

-Merritt

**SPECIAL MESSAGE FOR
OUR DONORS AND CONTRIBUTORS**

We always appreciate contributions in support of Society programs and preservation efforts. Those who wish to contribute regularly may find it easiest to pledge a specific amount each month. Such a donation, transferred automatically from your credit card, goes directly to support our programs and mission. To enroll, please call 518-374-0263, option 5, or email office@schist.org and ask for assistance. Contributions are deductible to the extent of the law. We thank you for your generosity.

Exhibits and Programs – September and October 2013

For more information about our events, please check our website, www.schist.org or call the Historical Society at (518) 374-0263 and listen for the option describing Programs. Please call (518) 887-5073 regarding programs at the Mabee Farm, or at the George E. Franchere Education Center (FEC). All EXHIBITS and PROGRAMS are free for Society members and students, and \$5.00 for non-members unless otherwise indicated.

EXHIBITS

@ 32 Washington Avenue

(Vrooman Room: now through October) ***Underlying Structures: What Shaped the Victorian Woman?*** From fashion to faith and weddings to funerals, *Underlying Structures* takes an in-depth look at how women dressed during the Victorian era. Included in the display are eight dresses from the era, jewelry and personal effects, and objects related to mourning practices.

@ The Mabee Farm

(FEC upstairs) Now through mid-September: ***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 buildings; and tells the story of their evolution at the Mabee Farm. Also included in this exhibit is Len Tantillo's newest painting, *Legacy*.

(FEC upstairs) Opening in September: ***The Other Westinghouse: George Westinghouse, Sr. and Advances in Agriculture***. Although not as well known as his son, George Westinghouse, Sr. left a large impact on American life, especially in the field of agriculture. See how farming was revolutionized in Schenectady.

(FEC downstairs) ***The Art of Karen Cummings***. The work of this local artist features local landscapes, animal portraits, house portraits, and still-life paintings.

(Nilsen Dutch Barn) ***The Erie Canal Impact: Changing Agriculture in the Mohawk River Valley***. This exhibit highlights the changes that occurred on farms along the Mohawk River with the construction of the Erie Canal. The Mabees and their neighbors shifted from cash crops like corn and wheat to specialized products like dairy, fruits, and vegetables. Here is an opportunity to see some of the distinctive agricultural and cooking tools in the Mabee Farm collection.

PROGRAMS

@ 32 Washington Avenue

Thursday, September 12, 2013 at 6:00 PM:
Women Soldiers in the American Civil War
Speaker: Lisa Potocar

Saturday, October 19, 2013, 9:30 AM-4:00 PM

Genealogy Day - Join us in the Library for speakers on a variety of genealogy topics and for open research time.

@ The Mabee Farm

Saturday, September 7, 9 AM- 9 PM and Sunday, September 8, 8:30 AM-5 PM. (See ad on page 7.)
War on the Mohawk: Revolutionary War Re-enactment

SCHS members may experience **Sampler Class Showcases** at no charge other than the cost of materials. These demonstrations will be taught on **Saturdays from 10:00 AM to 11:00 AM in the kitchen area of the English Barn by Pam Bucci. Registration is necessary and is limited to SCHS members only. Please call (518) 887-5073, ext 102 to register.** The schedule is:

September 14 – Make your own dog biscuits

September 28 – Learn to set rivets and grommets and make a leather key fob. (\$3.00 for materials)

October 5 – Cooking for the freezer

October 26 – Cord weaving and braiding – learn to use a lucet and a kumihimo braiding disc. (\$2.00 for materials)

Classes

Saturday, September 14, 9:00 AM – 12:00 noon

Perennial Design II: Construction and Design

Design your own garden space using perennials.

Instructor: Kathy Oughton of Acadian Farm

Tuition: \$35 plus \$5.00 for materials

Saturday, October 5, 9:00 AM – 4:00 PM

Beginning Blacksmithing – explore a variety of forging techniques; learn to make nails, S-hooks, and how to care for a forge and equipment. Class sizes are small.

Instructor: John Ackner

Tuition: \$150 incl. materials.

Saturday, October 26, 1:00 PM – 5:00 PM

Victorian Wall Hanging Doll Ornaments – make Victorian style cotton and paper dolls. No experience necessary. For ages 12 and above.

Instructor: Stacey Mead

Tuition: \$30.00 plus \$20.00 material fee.

Gokhale - continued from page 1.

Shankar Laxman Gokhale was a resident of Schenectady for over fifty years. Schenectady County made him a citizen in 1920, but a few years later, the U.S. Supreme Court declared his citizenship invalid. The story of Gokhale's personal struggle illustrates the changes surrounding ideas of race and immigration in the 1920s.

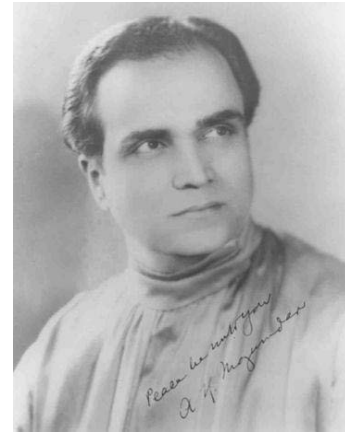
Gokhale was born in 1869 in Wai, India. He earned master's degrees from the University of Calcutta in both physics and chemistry, and was awarded prizes for having the highest overall academic average and the highest average in physics. In India, he served as a professor and as President at Holkar College. He was dismissed from his position under suspicion of engaging in seditious activity, although no evidence of such activity was ever discovered by the police. He came to the United States in 1911 and almost immediately moved to Schenectady, where he was employed by General Electric as an electrical engineer, working with Charles Steinmetz, L.T. Robinson, and others. His wife Uma and their two children joined him at 6 Elbert Street in Schenectady in 1922. The couple had three more children born in the United States. Gokhale would continue to work for GE until his retirement in 1933.

Gokhale was also active in political, religious, and social life in Schenectady. He was a founding member of the Sociology Club and the Schenectady Free Thought Society. He frequently spoke publicly about unemployment, comparative religion, and Indian customs, culture, and history. Although he worked closely with many Socialists in the Sociology Club, he did not consider himself to be one and sought to challenge Socialists at any opportunity, publishing letters seeking public debates in the *Schenectady Gazette* and the *New York Call*. He also spoke several times about the life and teachings of Jesus. Although he had not converted to Christianity, he was interested in the study and discussion of religion and taught a Bible class at the First Congregational Church. He and his wife were also members of the First Methodist Church's Golden Age Fellowship.

Gokhale died in Schenectady in 1962. In 1969, his son, Madhu, a 1927 graduate of Union College, established the annual Shankar Gokhale Prize at Union and at Indore University in India.

The story of Gokhale's struggle for citizenship begins with the story of how the United States has defined which foreign-born residents could become citizens. The Naturalization Act of 1790 restricted naturalization to "free white persons," thus excluding Native Americans, indentured servants, slaves, free African Americans, and

Asians. Not until nearly a century later was the law expanded to grant citizenship to African Americans. Native Americans were granted citizenship in 1924, under the Snyder Act. Asians continued to be explicitly excluded from becoming naturalized citizens until the mid-twentieth century.



Akhay Kumar Mozumdar

Although Asians were generally excluded from naturalization, those born in India were not always considered to be Asian, but rather to be Caucasian under the law. In 1913, Akhay Kumar Mozumdar became the first Indian-born person to earn U.S. citizenship. His case established a legal precedent that people from India were considered to be Caucasian and thus eligible for naturalization.

When Shankar Gokhale applied to Schenectady County to become a naturalized citizen in 1920, the *Schenectady Gazette* reported that "The question was raised whether or not it was advisable to admit him, as his wife and two children are still in India and his wife cannot speak English." Gokhale reiterated his intention to make the United States his home and assured the examiners that his wife would soon begin study of English and would not join him in the United States until she had some command of the language. He was then naturalized. Further, the definition of Gokhale as Caucasian, and thus white, seemed to be reflected in his racial identification by New York State and Federal Censuses workers. Gokhale was defined as being "white" in the 1915 New York State Census and 1920 Federal Census. Following changes in immigration and naturalization laws in the early 1920s, Gokhale and his family were defined as "black" in the 1925 New York State Census, and thereafter defined in the Federal Census as "Hindu," which was used as a racial rather than religious category. This shift came in part from a landmark 1923 Supreme Court ruling in the case of Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian Sikh and veteran of World War I.



Bhagat Singh Thind

The court found in a unanimous decision that, despite being anthropologically Caucasian, Indians were not white in accordance with the definitions of the common man, and would be considered Asian under the law. “It is a matter of familiar observation and knowledge that the physical group characteristics of the Hindus render them readily distinguishable from the various groups of persons in this country commonly recognized as white,” wrote Justice Sutherland in the decision. “The children of ... European parentage quickly merge into the mass of our population and lose the distinctive hallmarks of their European origin. On the other hand, it cannot be doubted that the children born in this country of Hindu parents would retain indefinitely the clear evidence of their ancestry.” This ruling stripped all previously-naturalized Indian-born people—including Shankar Gokhale—of their U.S. citizenship, as prosecutors argued that Indian-born immigrants had secured their citizenship illegally.

Following *United States v. Thind*, the Immigration Act of 1924 (the Johnson–Reed Act) further codified the exclusion of members of certain racial and ethnic groups from immigrating to the United States. It was passed amid an atmosphere of racism, xenophobia, and fear of the changing face of American demographics. The law severely restricted the immigration of Southern and Eastern Europeans and completely prohibited the immigration of Asians. South Asians were finally permitted to become naturalized citizens under the Luce–Celler Act of 1946. The exclusion of other Asian

immigrants was nullified in 1952, under the McCarran–Walter Act. The Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 finally eliminated “national origin” as a basis in establishing immigration quotas.

Gokhale fought hard to regain his citizenship following the Thind case. In 1926, Senator David Reed of Pennsylvania introduced a resolution that would confirm the naturalizations of Indian-born persons naturalized prior to the Thind decision. The resolution would affect about 70 Indian Americans. Reed arranged for a hearing before the Senate Committee on Immigration at which a number of Indian Americans were called to demonstrate “the high character and intellectual achievement of most of the Hindus who have become naturalized citizens.” Gokhale gave his testimony, answering questions about his work, family, and his political involvement. In the end, Reed’s resolution was tabled. In *United States v. Gokhale*, the Circuit Court of Appeals found that Gokhale “was not in fact eligible for naturalization . . . for he is concededly a Hindu, and under that case a Hindu is not a white person as the statute defines that phrase.” In 1928, the Supreme Court moved to have the appeal of Gokhale vacated with the understanding that he would be permitted to regain his citizenship.

As Gokhale fought the United States government in the courts for his right to citizenship, he contrasted his treatment by the government with his treatment by people in Schenectady. “Justice Sutherland of the United States Supreme Court has now declared that the people of this country do not want any Hindus here, as they are instinctively opposed to the assimilation of Hindus,” said Gokhale as he spoke to the Hindustan Club at the Hotel Van Curler in 1926. “My personal experience during the last 15 years is just the reverse. I have received the heartiest welcome from all my American friends and acquaintances.”

In another instance, a newspaper story dispatched from Washington, D.C. following the Senate hearing quoted Gokhale as speaking in broken English. One of Gokhale’s Schenectady friends, Ben Levy, quickly wrote a letter to the *Schenectady Gazette* in Gokhale’s defense. Levy explained that he had known Gokhale for over a decade and had heard him as a public speaker many times. “It is true, Mr. Gokhale lacks the characteristic pronunciation of English as used by the American born,” wrote Levy, “but his exceptionally able command of English has been the source of favorable comment on more than one occasion. I truly wish that my English could be compared favorably to that of Mr. Gokhale. I am asking you to publish this as a matter of simple justice to a very exceptional man.”

New Materials in the Library

BOOKS AND CDs

1937 Schenectady/Scotia City Directory, gift of

Martha Fowler

The Bradts: A True American Family (CD), gift of

Bradt Family Society

Early American Architecture by Hugh Morrison, gift of **Sydney Rombola**

Index to *Frontiersmen of New York State* by Jephtha Simms, gift of **Deanna Smith**

The Long Groat Line, by James D. Groat, Jr., gift of **Donald Keefer**

The Mysterious Black Migration, 1800-1820: The Van Vranken Family and Other "Free" Families of African Descent in Washington County, New York by L. Lloyd Stewart

Schenectady YWCA Expansion: Draft & Final

Environmental Impact Statement, gift of **Rob Petito**

Serendipity in Science: Twenty Years at Langmuir

University (Autobiography of Vincent J. Schaefer), gift of **Richard Vang**

DONALD KEEFER COLLECTION

Ancestry of Jonathan Ashton Allen; Card; Collins

House [Glenville]; Compton; Portrait of Isaac

DeGraff; Descendants of Johannes Graat (Groat) of

the Hudson Valley; Groat Family; Descendants of

George and Frances (Clyde) Groat; Descendants of

John and Phebe J. (Bills) Groat of Hammond,

Indiana; Samuel W. Groat Family; Genealogy of the

Groot (or Groat) Family of Schenectady, 1663-1992

[19 vols. and Index]; Groot Families in the

Netherlands; Groot/Groat Families Unplaced;

Historical Documents and Photographs; Marriages

of Revs. Elijah & Calvin Herrick, 1796-1876;

Marriages by Rev. John Calvin Toll, 1803-1844;

Montgomery County [History]; Nellis Tavern [St.

Johnsville]; Palatine Lutheran Church, Montgomery

Co. [History]; Presbyterian Church of Amsterdam

Marriages, 1826-1883; Town of Rotterdam

[History]; Vedder Tavern [Glenville]; Harmanus

Van Vleck; Volkert & Peter Van Vleck of West

Glenville; James Van Vranken Family of West

Glenville. All above are gifts of **Donald Keefer**

HISTORIC DOCUMENTS AND PHOTOS

Photographs of Arthur Sylvester and Schenectady

Railway Co., gift of **Carolyn J. Banker**

Advertisement for a house for sale in Schenectady by

Robert Hudson (1798), gift of **Buffalo History**

Museum

Marriage certificate for Charles Wittemeier and Mary

Schleuter (1867), gift of **Crandall Public Library**

HISTORIC DOCUMENTS AND PHOTOS, cont'd

Passport of Rose Elizabeth Rupp of Schenectady, gift of **Deb Crosby**

Schenectady Bank check signed by Charles Steinmetz, gift of **Donna Dae Gilchrist**

Niskayuna photographs, gift of **Mardy Moore**

Oversized photograph of ALCO locomotive (1924), gift of **John and Rosella Valentine**

YEARBOOKS

Mont Pleasant High School (1952), gift of **Janine Lordi**

Scotia-Glenville High School (1953, 1955-1974, 1977-1991, 1994-1997), gift of **Frank Strauss**

A Project to Discover Schenectady County's Eastern European Roots

Phyllis Zych Budka and Bernice Izzo

On **Saturday, November 9 at 10:30 a.m.**, the Society will host a gathering to initiate the title project. Our objective is to share information and help each other to discover, document, and digitally preserve genealogy, stories, and pictures of Schenectady County's Eastern European immigrants. We will begin by sharing experiences from our genealogy research. We invite others to share information and discuss what additional information or help is needed. The group will discuss next steps to implement these ideas. We plan to work together to fill the void—the lack of documentation—on the substantial population of Eastern Europeans who helped to build Schenectady.

Phyllis: I have long been aware of the "invisibility" of my heritage in the SCHS archives. Yet there were more than 4,000 Polish immigrants in Schenectady during the 1920s and 30s. I discovered that 45 individuals came to Schenectady from the southern Polish town of Nowy Targ. I now know that my own roots in Nowy Targ can be traced to at least 1800. In the process of my research and writing, I have learned a lot and am willing to help others with similar backgrounds find their roots. I understand some Polish and a little Russian.

Bernice: My grandmother is a daughter of a Polish immigrant who settled on Eastern Avenue hill. Her father worked at ALCO for forty years. I have never discovered where she came from in Poland. My discovery process taught me to use the computer to do a lot of research, including using Ancestry.com and Family Tree Maker software. I am willing to share this knowledge with others.

Please join us to discover, document, and preserve Schenectady County's Eastern European roots!

Around the Society

Two Row Wampum event at Mabee Farm



Hubert deLeew, Paul Tonko, and Hickory Edwards holding wampum.



'Howlin' at the Moon with Three Quarter North

	Revolutionary War Re-enactment
	Saturday & Sunday September 7 & 8
	Cannon & musket battles Horse demonstrations Boat battles on the Mohawk River Punch & Judy Show Saturday night barn dance
	Mabee Farm Historic Site Rte 5s, Rotterdam Jct



Bikers stop at Mabee Farm for Two Row Wampum

Photos: Ann Aronson

A Tribute to Sally van Schaick



Nancy and Jake van Schaick



A family sing along in the John & Sally van Schaick Lecture Hall, August 4 in the George E. Franchere Education Center




Schenectady County Historical Society
32 Washington Avenue
Schenectady, New York 12305

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Schenectady County Historical Society



53rd Annual
Stockade Walkabout
Saturday, September 28th, 2013
11:00am - 5:00pm

Advance Tickets: \$20.00
Day of Event: \$25.00

Tickets Available At:
Proctor's Ticket Office
432 State St, Schenectady
Open Door Bookstore
128 Jay Street, Schenectady
Kulak's Nursery
1615 Route 146, Rexford

Schenectady County
Historical Society
32 Washington Avenue,
Schenectady

Presented by:
The Stockade Association and
the Schenectady County Historical Society